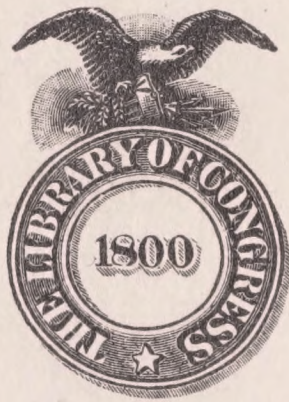


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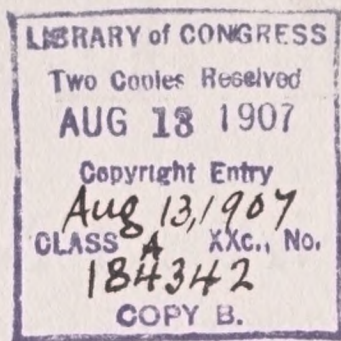
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BY EDNA KENTON.

AUTHOR OF "WHAT MANNER OF MAN"



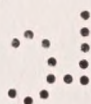
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THE DE VINNE PRESS

TO
MY MOTHER

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I

THE little group sitting on a small, retired veranda bent forward interestedly as the sudden clatter of heavy, plated harness and the click of horses' hoofs broke out on the driveway just below. As the hotel groom released the horses' heads at an imperious order from the trap's single occupant, a blonde and beautiful young woman, and the bright red equipage leaped forward with renewed din, the specially interested onlookers sank back into their chairs with amicable smiles as signs of recognized truce before the interrupted discussion of this same young woman broke out again.

"Just for instance!" remarked Farda Grantham disdainfully, with a gesture toward the crowded beach driveway down

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which the girl was guiding, with almost ostentatious skill, her beautiful horses.

Mrs. Gresham, leaning back in her low chair, laughed delightedly. "Well, whatever she is or is n't, the girl *can* drive and ride," she asserted warmly. "Eaton, did you see her tame that ramping thing the other morning?"

Her husband nodded assent, and Mrs. Gresham swept on: "She was riding that morning, and she had a black devil of a horse—his eyes and his ears and his nose were like flames. It was in view of the entire hotel frontage, right out yonder, and it was terrifying and delightful and unutterably loud, of course. But it was a splendid thing to see. Without doubt she's Wild West, as they all say—she learned some of those display tricks of hers nowhere but from the trickiest of cowboys—but truly I felt like cheering her as she fought and won that battle; she might have been killed easily. The picture of her!—her dead black habit and her dead black horse, and that gold-yellow hair of

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hers beneath that rigidly correct Derby, and her black gauntleted whip-hand—”

“Look!” interrupted Miss Grantham. She pointed down the beach drive, and their eyes followed her accusing finger. Before the club-house, a quarter of a mile below, the red trap halted, and on its high seat its white-clad, golden-haired occupant sat, serenely waiting. As a lithe, athletic young fellow ran down the steps of the club-house and swung up into the vacant seat beside the girl, the watching group sat back again, this time without smiles on the women’s part. Eaton Gresham exchanged grins with his smoking companion opposite, and then glanced for sympathy at the third man of the group. But Drake Lorimer neither looked back nor smiled. Whereupon Gresham gave him a malicious dig in the side.

“Wake up, Drake, old man!” he urged. “That was Reggie!”

“Eaton, don’t be a fool!” implored his wife. “Drake is worried, as he has a right to be, of course.”

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"Oh, hardly worried," Lorimer responded pleasantly, smiling slightly now at Gresham.

"But if it were just a bit more open, eh?" suggested the affable Mrs. Gresham. "He 's with her all the time, Drake, and of late it 's been after this fashion—ever since you and Jack Lowe came down."

Lorimer tossed a charred cigarette over the railing. "We 'll all be rustivating at The Pines in another fortnight," he remarked. "There 'll be nothing to all this, once out of sight and sound."

"Nothing to it!" cried Farda Grantham. "It 's high time you were looking into it then, for your own enlightenment as well as Reggie's good. As Dell says, he 's with her all the time; it 's appalling. Not that he 's unlike a great lot of the men here, in that respect; Jack, for instance, when Reggie gives him a chance; but he 's such a nice boy, and *such a boy*—only twenty! And she 's—how old should you say, Dell?—twenty-six—seven—eight?"

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"I don't incriminate myself that way," retorted Dell Gresham. "I 've a painfully constructed reputation for good nature. But all of twenty-six, Farda. She 's mature."

"She 's worse than mature," said Farda coldly. "She 's experienced—"

Drake Lorimer, listening intently to all the quick give and take of speech, lost the rest of the girl's words through a whispered question of Mrs. Gresham's.

"Does Aunt Frances seem to you to be aware of the state of things at all?" she asked eagerly. "No, I have n't dared say anything definite to her, since the first time I mentioned it. For she went at Reggie with that *grande dame* air of hers, you know; and Reggie flared up inwardly, though he was as dear to her as he always is, and she missed sight of his hidden resentment. But take my word for it, Drake, the little boy is badly caught. So badly that I verily believe it all depends on the girl, and I 've wondered if her sense of

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humor is subtle enough to save the day. She 's half a century older than Reggie, you know."

She nodded her head sapiently, and edged her chair nearer Lorimer's. She was a rather young woman, modern to a degree. Naturally fair of skin, she wore a perpetual coat of tan to which she assiduously added at all seasons of the year in one place or another. Her eyes were her greatest attraction; they were placed peculiarly far apart. Of perfect roundness, they seemed like holes burnt in her impudent little face, all the more like holes because they were mostly deep black pupil, set about with long, dark lashes, thick, yet with each and every lash distinct. The effect of Dell Gresham's lashes was that which one gets in a photograph cheap and too much retouched—they were so strongly accentuated in a face otherwise insignificant. For her nose was badly modeled, and her mouth was crooked, and her teeth none of the straightest. But, given those eyes and lashes, unbeautiful as they were,

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her face was raised instantly from mediocrity to a plane intensely magnetic.

Drake Lorimer looked at her thoughtfully, with his deep-set eyes holding scarcely a gleam in their lazy depths.

"It was your letter, and that alone, which brought me down here, Dell," he said at last, almost impatiently. "I came because you forejudged me a coward if I did not come. But I 'm not believing it 's a matter one hundredth as serious as all you women are trying to make out. Boys have a dozen desperate cases—"

"Reggie Wines has never had one yet," Mrs. Gresham interrupted shrewdly. "That 's what makes so much of it depend on the girl. A first love affair is *always* serious, especially a boy's affair. A girl usually is safely enough in love with Love to make the man a minor matter, but a boy is in love with Woman, and it depends on the woman—oh, infinitely!" ended Dell, characteristically vague, and yet appallingly definite.

"In any event, Dell," said Lorimer, "the

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boy is not eligible. He is too much her junior; he has not great wealth—”

Mrs. Gresham sniffed at the feeble reasoning. “At least once in her life every woman loves a *boy!*” she admitted. “At least once! Then there’s enough to Reggie in the way of family to counterbalance any lack of stupendous wealth on his side. She’s got enough of *that* for ten generations, but when it comes to family—can she go back one?”

“What family has she? Father—mother?”

“No mother, thank heaven—you can imagine what she would be like. A father, not unpresentable until he begins to talk, and not then unless one is mercilessly conventional. But he keeps discreetly in the background; plays poker most of the time. The men say that he is at his best at cards, that he is almost a gentleman then, especially when he is losing, and that he is at least a full-blooded man. He worships this girl, it’s easy to see. At the charity fête they gave down here last week, he bought

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her way in with a thousand-dollar check—oh, it was this way: I caught a frightful rose cold, and was simply out of it, and he came over to say he 'd heard 'the lady who was to read palms had tuckered out,' and that his daughter, being a stranger, had n't been noticed with a booth or a stall, but that she could read hands as well as any lady there, and offered her services and the check. There was a significant sequence to his phrases which impressed the treasurer, and they took both. She did make something of a sensation, for her make-up was gorgeous. She wore a bushel of uncut turquoises and cloth-of-gold and that sort of thing. But with all that splendor, and the weight of jewels that a less vigorous young animal would have staggered under, she 's too evidently only 'Pick-me-up!'

'You have a vivid tongue, Dell," Lori-mer protested faintly. "Has she no friends here of any sort?"

"Since the fête, yes; most of the men, but no women, Drake. And it 's been since then that Reggie Wines 'has taken to dog-

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ging her steps. Oh, yes, I 've talked to her some—we 've met on the verandas—and she 's a good-natured, happy-go-lucky thing. But oh, Drake!"

"And Mrs. Wines is n't aware of the—what you term 'seriousness' of the affair?"

"Not from me!" said her niece promptly. "I gave her fair warning at first, and she took high-class action, and I daresay she thinks the incident closed."

Lorimer moved impatiently. "Really," he said, "I don't see what there is to do. Anything, that is, which won't tend to make serious what may be merely fleeting."

He paused; then added slowly: "I met the girl myself, last week. You remember I ran down for the fête casually—she read my hand, gave me a remarkably good reading; showed herself, in a blunt, unsubtle fashion, a good deal of a physiognomist. She managed to get a lot of intangible atmosphere into that curtained recess. I remember now, she knew me immediately—there 's something about the girl that is intensely magnetic—attractive—"

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He broke off, his attention distracted by an irritated wave of his neighbor's hand, not Gresham's, but that of Gresham's *vis-à-vis*, the third man of the group. Its owner's voice followed swiftly, and arrested the attention of every one. John Lowe was a noticeably ugly man of some thirty-two or -three years, sandy-haired and dully florid. His nose was long, and sloped at a peculiar angle from his sloping forehead. His jaw was squarely built and massive, and his mouth was large. His lips met each other at right angles rather than with gentle curves. His ugliness was so compelling a thing as to make of him a striking man. He was a successful painter, and bore the appearance of a thrifty business man. Even his hand was not of the artist's type, though the sight of those thick fingers holding masterfully the brush could never be forgotten.

"You plunge into your subject like a blind diver, my dear Farda," he said coolly. "Denys raves over her; curses fate that she was n't born a child of the Quar-

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tier. That portrait he did of her—the one he made his big hit on—is an amazing thing. You must have seen it yourself, if you took in the *Salon* last year. It had a wall to itself, great big canvas, blonde girl with blue jewels of eyes, blue background—all of it was daringly, glaucously blue—”

“Oh, I saw it, of course,” said Miss Grantham impatiently. “And I read in it just what you are eliminating—inherent coarseness, mental, physical, and probably moral. It was loud, overbearing, shriekingly insistent. The very dress—the way she wore it—the handling of that left shoulder—do you remember it? Yes, Denys is a psychologist, but we differ vitally in interpreting him.”

Lowe sank more deeply into his comfortable chair, and became leisurely reminiscent.

“I met her almost two years ago, while that portrait was being done. Met her for the first time one morning in Denys’ place. She was giving him a sitting, and I stum-

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bled in, and the two of them together let me in on it. She was a stunning sight that day—I tell you, Farda, you 've read him wrong; because Denys and I talked her over later, deliberately, with the appalling frankness which painters and physicians dare to use—it 's *not* inherent coarseness he 's put there—I should n't grant that at all."

"I saw her one day, down yonder on the bathing beach," Farda interrupted with provocative calm. "Just two or three weeks ago. She happened to wear black and red this time, instead of blue. You mentioned daringly blue. This was audacious *rouge-et-noir*. I got down there—you were there, too, and staring generously—just as she was coming up from the surf. All about her there were other bathing-costumes quite as conspicuous in cut and color. But if she had shrieked she could n't have announced her presence more loudly than she did by the very force of her personality. It literally shouts; *she* does n't have to."

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Lowe smiled broadly as he listened to the girl's cold recital.

"Precisely!" he retorted, with a crispness in his voice that went well with the snap in his gray-green eyes. "Because she was a thing apart from every other woman there. Denys was right, and that day I saw he was right. She looked the primitive Woman. She might have been *the* primeval Woman walking untrodden sands, pressing the springing earth when the world was young. She was so nobly unashamed and so purely human—ah yes, she was! The very atoms of her might have been scooped up from virgin earth, from sea-born clay just washed to shore; and a Rodin hand might have modeled her!"

Mrs. Gresham beat softly with her foot upon the floor. She put her two elbows on her knees and dropped her chin into her hands, and her eyes sparkled wickedly above them. Farda turned coldly to her.

"Is n't it strange, Dell," she observed disdainfully, "how men stand up for a *de-classé* woman if she's pretty? Every one

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said, all over Paris, whether they knew the girl or not, and it was mostly not, of course, that the Denys portrait was a pitiless thing!"

"Virginia saw it, too," reminded Lowe. "Was it pitiless, Vee?"

A slender girl of twenty, sitting a little apart from the others, and evidently absorbed in a book, looked quickly up at the direct question, and glanced about the group. Then she looked appealingly at her cousin.

"I did n't hear, Drake," she said to him.

"Lowe wants your opinion of that blue lady of Denys' which you liked so much a year or so ago, when you saw it," Lorimer answered absently. Stray phrases from Lowe's late rhapsody were beating about in his brain.

"Wake up, Vee," Miss Grantham besought her plaintively. "That portrait of Clem Merrit—"

"I know," the girl said. Her eyes, set wide apart and intended by nature for merely ruminative contemplation, were

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drawn together in the pained earnestness of her thought.

"I don't like to think of that portrait, or that girl," she said at last with startling candor. "They are both of them too—happy. As if no sorrow or pain could ever come near her. It is enough to make any one—jealous of her!"

She broke off abruptly, with a slow flush creeping over her face, and then she turned her chair about, and seemed to bury herself in her book. A slight pause followed which was too heavily weighted with common understanding to be endured for long.

"I still insist—" began Miss Grantham blandly. Lowe stopped her.

"You 'll insist one way or another with Death, my dear girl; and I should n't bet on Death as a sure thing at all."

Mrs. Gresham got up suddenly. "I can appreciate Jack's bleatings about primitive womanhood and all that," she remarked crisply; "and for myself, I don't mind the girl, the little I've seen of her; she's a type not without interest. But when you take

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her out of primitive environment, and put her—into Aunt Frances' remote circle, for instance—hush, here 's Aunt Frances now. You 're fairly warned, Drake, and I wash my hands right here of any sort of responsibility in Reggie's love affairs. The solution or the catastrophe is entirely up to you. I 'm off. Come, Eaton."

With the typically unreasoning obedience of the American husband, Gresham rose lazily to his feet, and followed in his wife's rippling wake. Lowe glanced across at Farda and raised his eyebrows intelligently, and at an answering nod from her they both rose and went away, taking Virginia with them. Mrs. Gresham cast one glance back over her very Frenchy shoulder, and, seeing Lorimer still alone, came back to him, her eyes alight with mischief.

"Do help Aunt Frances out!" she begged softly. "Her dearest, most secret wish is so transparent! All 's lovely, or would be, if both Virginia and Reggie were n't in love with the wrong people. However, you 've meddled successfully in Vee's little

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affair; it 's time for you to take up Reggie's."

"How does Virginia seem to you, Dell?" Lorimer asked quickly. "She had n't much to say to me one way or another—of course, I can't blame her."

"Mopey and languid, and given to long and solitary walks, only she has to walk so far here to get to the solitary places that she 's been sort of forced into mixing with people, which seems very hard luck to her, but is the best possible thing, of course," said Dell briskly. "She 's taken it rather hard, but she has sense enough to know, from all the evidence you and I presented, that that beast of a Marmaduke Saalsfield was as great a bounder as she could ever know. It was outrageous that she ever met him, but in these days one can't keep girls in pink cotton-batting—even nunnish creatures like Vee. And then, when she was allowed to go up to those Mortimers for the holidays, what could you or Aunt Frances expect!"

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"They are undoubtedly undesirable people," Lorimer began, but Dell interrupted.

"Oh, that depends on the point of view, Drake. Of their sort they 're a very good sort. Not squeamish at all, nothing *belles-lettres* about them or their crowd, but they know how to put up a jolly good time for themselves and their friends, of whom I 'm one. We were n't here then, or we 'd probably have been in the party, in which case I think I would have sent Vee home. It was too raw an initiation into the free-spoken life. How is it that extremes do so attract! One would have thought that Vee would have been the last girl there to catch his eye, but she was the first as I had the tale from Fannie Mortimer, and Vee—of course he 's a black, satanic, temple-frosted, interesting-looking man of the world, and to Vee he seemed the epitome of all wisdom. Well, he knows enough!"

Lorimer smiled grimly. "And now, at least, Vee knows a small part of the man-

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ner of his wisdom. It was like pulling a flower to pieces, to tell her."

"Oh, that was n't so hard," said Dell wisely, "as telling her that he 'd put up no fight. At first she 'd have defied us all, if he 'd met her half-way."

"The man could n't," Lorimer protested, whereat Mrs. Gresham snapped her fingers contemptuously.

"Of course he could n't, but did that keep Vee's pride from being cut into decimated ribbons! That 's what hurts the child so bitterly; though it 's killed her fascination as nothing else could, not even your shocking disclosures. Here 's Aunt Frances. To the rescue, Drake!"

"Don't rush away," said Lorimer calmly.

"Oh, thanks, but Eaton is glowering," returned Mrs. Gresham, with the most brazen of glances at Gresham's placid face. "Thanks, Aunt Frances, I can't. But you keep Drake company. This corner is the coolest spot about here to-day."

She pushed forward a chair for Mrs. Wines, quite close to Lorimer's.

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“Cheer him up, Aunt Frances,” she said.
“His latest hero ought to marry one girl,
and naughtily prefers another. And this
hero is no puppet.”

She flashed one wickedly amused glance
at Lorimer and slipped away.

II

AS Dell disappeared, Mrs. Wines turned with cordial eagerness to Lorimer.

"It is such a pleasure to see you again so soon," she said. "Last week your trip was so flying, and the confusion of that charity fête so great, that it was anything but satisfactory." She stopped to look searchingly at him. "Something is vexing you," she declared. "Something which will not work out, will not come right. I thought the book was altogether and finally done."

She bent toward him, a charming woman of barely twoscore years, with a beauty which was entirely individual. Her coloring was the peculiar pale-brown color-scheme which tinges the eyes, the hair, and even the skin with a faint, lovely olive. Her face was purely and delicately modeled, and her still slender figure held the lines of her early youth.

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Lorimer smiled. "Merely an inconsequent point," he assured her. "I've been rushing the novel through, trying to get the manuscript in before the first of the month, and haste and hot weather have played havoc with my nerves and temper."

"Oh, pray don't speak of nerves and havoc!" Mrs. Wines exclaimed wearily. "All my summer plans have gone magnificently awry. We should have been settled at The Pines now, with the first fortnight almost ended. But the workmen have dalled, and will not be out for another two weeks. You will come to us at the given word?"

"At the drop of the hat!" Lorimer assured her. "As it is, though, you all but have the regular group here—Dell, Eaton, Farda, Lowe, Virginia—"

"But here!" sighed Mrs. Wines. This stay at a noisy summer resort had not formed any part of her summer plans, for the last week in June always found her in her rambling, beautiful summer home, with a party about her made up of friends so

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near and congenial that it might well be called a family affair, and which for the first fortnight of every summer's stay, was practically the same, year after year. A part of its personnel might vary slightly from summer to summer, but its spirit remained constant. This summer, however, during the enforced wait, more to please her imperious young son than from her own choice, she had been staying at this place of his choosing, this somewhat loud summer resort, not so thronged, so early in the season, as to make it unbearable, but even now a place where the hotel contingent arrogantly outshone the cottage cliques in number and display.

"Yet I am surprised to find you lounging here," she added, after a moment's pause. "I thought I heard you and Reggie planning a stupendous tramp for to-day, and when neither of you appeared at luncheon I thought you were taking it."

"I lunched at the club," Lorimer explained. "I was feeling in fine feather for a prolonged stroll, and it met with Reggie's

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great favor when I suggested it; but later the old chap ducked, and I could n't hit his trail."

"That is not right," said Reggie's mother disapprovingly. "His time has been greatly taken up ever since he came down here, but when you are willing to give him as much of your time as you do, he should at least keep his engagements with you—"

Lorimer raised a beseeching hand. "Never dare breathe such a thing to Reggie! Never! I am absurdly fond of the boy, and in spite of the fifteen years between us, he has always condescended to look upon me as one of his immediate generation. Don't ever let such a gross insinuation as respect for the age he so blithely ignores come between him and me!"

Mrs. Wines looked at him with tender gratitude.

"How wisely his father planned for him!" she breathed. "When he gave you such charge over him—to be his friend. I can never thank you, Drake, for what you

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have done for him, been to him; for your help to me with him; for your loyalty to his father's trust in you!"

She paused a moment, looking with softened eyes across the flowering lawns to the sea beyond. Then she turned back to him.

"It gives me such comfort always to remember his last charge to you, a charge which has never yet weighed heavily on you, for there has never been a moment when imminent anxiety about my boy has assailed me; but it is a comfort always to remember that you have promised us both, his father and me, if the time of trial or need comes, to stand by Reggie."

"The promise was a feeble return for all Morley Wines did for me—meant to me," Lorimer reminded her gently. "I never gain a laurel leaf, you know, however small, that I don't feel like laying it on his tomb. He took me out of his lecture-courses, a half-blind cub, and he opened my eyes and fed me on his knowledge and his supreme culture—and, after all, the promise has been a perfunctory one. Reggie

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is n't the sort of chap to cause one much anxiety about his welfare."

"Indeed no," assented his mother, with tranquil pride. "And so much of that is due to you—ah, I know it, if you will not let me say it. I remember so often, during those last weeks, his father told me that a time was coming, sooner or later in the boy's life, when I could not count, objectively, at least; when it would take a man to help him, to lift him up, and set him on his feet again; and he chose you for that time, when it should come. And I am wondering, really, if I shall ever need you so; if Reggie will ever, for a time even, thrust me to one side, and make me of no account in his life. It is wisdom to think he will, and to be prepared, but deep in my heart I am at peace."

"When the time comes, command me," Lorimer said briefly.

Mrs. Wines laughed lightly. "One must believe, however, in the eternal balance of things. And I must expect, therefore, in the very scheme of nature, that he will

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some time, sooner or later, depart from the pleasant paths where we have walked together all his happy life long—”

In the tense silence which fell Lorimer glanced up, to look upon a poignant bit of human melodrama. Mrs. Wines was leaning forward, her wide eyes fastened on the path just below them, a path screened for the most part by position and shrubbery, whereon two people stood; one of them young Reginald Wines, and beside him, almost his peer in height, the girl of the brilliant red trap and the black horses; the girl of Claude Denys' portraying—Clem Merrit. She was tall, strikingly beautiful, molded along superb lines. She was of the pure blonde type. Her hair was like spun gold, without a tinge of *cendre* in it; it was the liquid honey of the harvest moon. Her eyes were as blue as the sea they looked out upon. Her eyebrows were exquisitely penciled, so finely drawn, with such delicate darkness and precision of outline, that one was fain to wonder if such perfection could be nature unassisted. Her coloring was so

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splendid that the same provocative thought again intruded itself. Her figure was perfect, and her clinging dress of lace and linen caressed every lovely line. And in her eyes as she looked upon the boy, and most of all, in his eyes as he looked on her— There was little that was tangible in the scene, but the atmosphere was suffocating, and in that lay all the reason why this mother should sink back in her chair as she did, faint and sick, and white to the lips. Up to this moment she had earnestly believed that she knew every thought of her open-hearted boy. She had even spoken to him of this girl, frankly, disdainfully—before she knew, before she knew! But this little scene, one upon which a staring universe might have gazed and been none the wiser, told her absolutely that somehow her boy was wholly hers no more, that he was living now a phase of life from whose sharing she was shut out.

And the thought was a shock. As a youngster Reggie had loathed dancing-school and its short-skirted little girls. In

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his preparatory school-days he had followed a god instead of any goddess—that great god whose symbol is a pigskin ball. So far he had had no time for the worship of girls; and now, without warning, and without choice—though when did a mother ever choose!—this thing was thrust nakedly upon her!

Now came Drake Lorimer's bad quarter of an hour, to whose full enjoyment Dell Gresham had maliciously left him; during which he spoke with the full courage of his lack of conviction. In these last two days stray bits of gossip had come his way with that fiendish directness which a dominant idea impels. The girl herself had struck his eye at every turn. He had seen Reggie numbered in her train without undue prominence, yet wearing a confident calm which was, to his moral guardian, rather disconcerting than reassuring, and which argued, in so young a lover, no pangs of uncertainty. Lorimer had learned, too, that there were many hours in the day when Miss Merrit could not be found; hours

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when she vanished with her horses and Reggie, or with her motor car and Reggie, or on foot with Reggie. Through all his specific arguments anent Reggie's good sense and his general arguments that a boy must have an experience or two, there had run, like a glaring thread, a disquieting doubt of the woman herself. For young Reginald Wines, arrived at years of discretion, would be very much worth while, and it might easily occur to an adventuress, even to an honest woman struggling honestly for social advancement, that the coming years were more easily assured by attaching the present immature ones.

Given these previous reflections, therefore, Lorimer faced a situation when the pained eyes of the boy's mother met his in mute question; and facing them, he made something of a botch at lying like a gentleman, and the truths he had to tell were bitter ones. His only counsel, to give the boy his head and time, a bit of counsel based primarily on the eternal pitilessness of man to man in all affairs of love or

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matrimony, was not a counsel to satisfy here, and other than this he had none to offer.

“The surest way to precipitate all things is to try to put a stop to anything,” he repeated several times. “One can’t meddle. Both he and the girl would resent it instantly, and rightly. He has come to the place at last, Frances, where you and I, both of us, are helpless. He must work out of this himself, just as any man’s ultimate salvation lies, finally, in his own hands.”

But if he fell before the situation, Mrs. Wines rose to it gallantly, and after her departure, Lorimer sat frowning over the silken bonds she had wound about him with a feminine finesse.

On this night there was to be a faint echo of last week’s charity fête in the form of a charity dance, and Lorimer, hitherto free to go or to stay away, was pledged now to go. As he sat there, after his merciless captor had departed, though in sorry

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triumph after all, he stared sadly at the spot where, not long before, two young creatures had unwittingly betrayed much to eyes altogether unsympathetic.

"I act a chivalrous rôle to-night," he murmured dismally. "Special watch in murderers' row, and if I succeed in donning the confessor's hood, so much the better. And the girl—after all, the entire question resolves itself into this: is she or is she not—"

But at this point young Reggie Wines, healthy, happy, and buoyantly alive, vaulted lightly over the railing to suggest taking their deferred stroll.

On their return they passed an open pavilion where Miss Merrit was holding court. She was still in the white linen and lace creation in which she had driven down the beach driveway behind her jet-black horses, and the number of men surrounding her was appalling—might be, that is, to so young a lover. Lorimer glanced briefly at Reggie, and felt more discon-

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certed than he cared to confess, when he saw the boy's face showed no trace of concern. He was too evidently sure of his ground.

As they came directly opposite the pagoda-like structure, within full hearing of the somewhat loud talk and laughter, the girl turned slightly from her group of highly entertained men to smile brightly, sunnily, at Reggie Wines. Lorimer winced slightly at the significance of the glance, fleeting as a breath of the west wind, yet laden with the mystery of common memories. There was nothing subtle, however, in the way in which she met Lorimer's eyes in full gaze, with obvious recognition. Lorimer bowed, in return for that recognition which he felt had nothing whatever to do with their fugitive meeting in her gipsy tent a week before. The girl evidently knew him, and knew him thoroughly. Under other conditions it might have flattered him somewhat, since he was no more than mortal man; but this evening

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he felt no throb of satisfied vanity. Her recognition of him seemed not flattering so much as ominous. In a silence that was distinctly unrestful, he and Reginald walked the short remaining distance to their hotel.

III

LATER that evening, Lorimer, immolated on an altar which he himself had helped to rear, approached Clem Merrit, and took her card from her.

"You remember me," he asserted humbly. "You told me my fortune a week ago, which was altogether clever. Your recognition of me this afternoon makes me bold enough to dare this throng surging about you, and that without delay. I am taking the ninth."

"Everything in sight, that is," said Clem Merrit gaily. "No, I was n't saving it up, not for anybody, unless it was Reggie, and he's got his share, *I* think."

Lorimer scribbled his name with a smile. He thought that he would like to try the interesting experiment of putting a book of purest English prose into Miss Merrit's hands, and beseeching her to read there-

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from. He wondered if she might not make Addison and De Quincey, in their most exalted and sonorous moments, read like modern slang. It was not always her words which put the flavor of cant into her phrasings, although her speech was plentifully besprinkled with the paprika-like zest of colloquialisms. The more he listened to her, the more definite his feeling grew that it was the girl's intonations which made her manner of speech distinctively her own.

"The boy is fortunate," he said, not without intention, as he returned her card.

"Yes," agreed the girl. "He 's got just about every other one, and then some. Yes, I remember you. I 've seen you all over the place lately. You 're a great friend of the Wineses, are n't you? I know lots of people here that way, by sight. You forever meet people here that way, till you know them like your grandmother's picture, and then, when you do the decent thing and speak—" She drew her bare shoulders together and shivered exaggeratedly. "But you 're not that

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sort," she added. "Not if you 're Reggie's sort. Reggie's straight as a string." She nodded her head at him with marked confidence, and smiled her large-hearted, irresistible smile. Evidently with him, for some reason not yet explained, she felt thoroughly *en rapport*.

More than once, as he listened, Lorimer became convinced that here lay something which it behooved some one to meet and cope with to a finish. One might easily understand how a boy would fall powerless before such friendly beauty. There was no shred of boasting in her speech, and it was the absence of that ultra-feminine thing which stirred Lorimer to quick anxiety. He knew well that Reggie was indeed as straight as a string. It occurred to him just here, with the force of a totally new idea, that this girl might be possessed of the same quality; might mean all of what her assured words seemed to convey; and then—what?

"Here comes Jack!" the girl added. "Jack Lowe. He's the one who brought

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you in to have your palm read, you know. He 's a great friend of yours and the Wineses, too, ain't he? Well, he 's a great friend of mine, too—to have met him two years ago, and not have run up against him since! Yes, I remember a great lot, one way and another. How do I know all the truck I read from your hand? Oh, I don't explain my little system. My book 's my own, and if I give myself heavy odds nobody knows it but me. These hotel porches are enough, though, to put any canny body into the fortune-telling business, with their tattle and their gabble. I 'll be round this corner when your turn comes. No, not with anybody special. Just floating round. A great deal nicer way, *I think!*”

Lorimer, dismissed, looked dutifully about him for his young cousin, who, in spite of her serious little face, and her serious little views, was as fond of motion as any twenty-year-old girl should be; but neither she nor Mrs. Wines was yet in evidence. Whereupon Mr. Lorimer heaved a sigh of infinite relief, and retired to an ob-

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scure corner where he might reflect upon subtleties and values until such time as he should be compelled to hark to duty's call.

Two hours later he found Clem Merrit, in her designated corner, floating round in the sense that she was not attached in the remotest manner to any woman there, although she was hemmed in by a double cordon of men. The evening was warm, and many chiffons and flowers hung dejected, but among her dilapidated sisters Clem Merrit shone resplendent. Her gown was still fresh and perfect, though by nature perishable. She was cool and unflushed, and she breathed evenly. And her laugh was gayer and louder, and her eyes more purely blue and gleaming.

As she saw Lorimer approaching, she reached forward and tapped a man smartly on the shoulder.

"Down in front, Mr. Prentiss!" she said, with her indescribable intonation which made common things seem fresh, and anything, old or new, common. "There 's a man behind you I want to see."

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She swept the entire circle aside, with flattering indifference and speed, and swayed toward Lorimer, thoroughly at her ease. He had never seen her for an instant when she was not the embodiment of composure, and with his imagination in full play he could not conjure up the vision of a situation where she would not be mentally comfortable.

She danced perfectly, and while she danced she talked incessantly of people and things, with an infectious good humor and a frank and beguiling confidence. Suddenly she stopped with a pleased little cry.

"There 's Mrs. Wines yonder, alone. I 've sort of fallen in love with that woman at a distance, do you know?" She laughed carelessly at her own folly. "Ordinarily I don't like women much. I 've never met her," she added.

The inference was unmistakable, and Lorimer made it gratefully, thereby easing his spirit mightily.

"Shall we go over to her?" he asked. There was a disgusted weariness in his

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voice, carefully held under though it was. He was altogether out of humor with his task, and he cursed circumstances vigorously as he looked down into the girl's frank, lovely eyes.

"Yes, indeed!" said Clem Merrit emphatically; and the effect was precisely as if she had said, "You bet!" "I actually ought to know Mrs. Wines," she continued easily, as they crossed the room together, "knowing Reggie so awfully well as I do. I 've kept telling him it looked queer, and that she 'd be sure to think so."

The next moment she was holding out her hand with thorough good-will to the black-gowned woman before her. It was not a small hand, yet for her it was not too large, being simply a part of her fine proportion. It was hardly a blue-blooded hand, but it was one which not one American woman in ten thousand possesses, and it had had for some years every advantage which unremitting grooming could give it.

' I 've been telling him," she said easily, "that I ought to know you, knowing Reg-

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gie so well. I 've told Reggie lots of times you 'd think it was queer, him and me together so much, and you and me perfect strangers. I told him I reckoned he did n't intend we should ever meet till we had to."

Her rich laugh rang out. For the fraction of a second Mrs. Wines caught her under lip hard; then she spoke gently:

"Since you are a friend of my son's—"

"Oh, that!" laughed the girl. "Yes, we 're friends all right!" She nodded at Lorimer, neither with special significance nor with awkward consciousness; rather as if certain signs were understood by the initiated, and as if she regarded him as one capable of such frankly certain interpretation. She turned back to Mrs. Wines with what Lorimer translated as a certain condescension toward one not yet within the inner circle, and she dropped down on the divan where the older woman was sitting. Her pale draperies flowed lightly over the tissue of Mrs. Wines' gown, and her white neck and shoulders and her

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golden head rose in exquisite relief against the dark-green velvet background.

"You run along," she said to Lorimer. "We don't need you any longer, do we, Mrs. Wines? I 'll cut a dance later and make it up." Then, with a dismissing nod and smile, she turned to the woman beside her.

"I 've been wanting to see you for days," she said frankly. "I don't take to women, as I was just telling him; most of them are a poor lot; but you took my fancy even before I had any idea you were Reggie's mother, before I knew Reggie even. He 's talked about you some." She paused almost hopefully. "I reckon he has n't talked to you much about me, has he? Has n't told you anything?"

Mrs. Wines struggled with a sick disgust and a paralyzing fear. Her world swam before her eyes in a grim chaos.

"My son has told me nothing," she said at last, almost in a whisper.

Clem Merrit sank back against the divan, and twisted her fan in her white fingers.

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For the first time she felt and showed a touch of nervousness, and with her strong, beautiful hands she worked almost savagely at the mother-of-pearl sticks. Suddenly they snapped and she crushed the entire pearl and lace creation together, and flung it to the floor.

"No more good!" she said, an odd thrill running through her voice and softening it strangely. "It matches this dress too—beats the fan that goes with it all hollow, and I got it three years ago, in Paris." She laughed without reason or happiness, a laugh whose frank pleasure in life was gone, eaten up in fierce self-consciousness. Then she turned back to the older woman, and faced her almost heroically, with a dumb honesty shining in her eyes.

"Reggie 's a nice boy," she said, an odd hush in her voice. He 's just a boy too. . . . I 'm twenty-six."

She pulled recklessly at one of her mauve orchids. Her head was bent and her eyes were on the flower. Mrs. Wines turned and stared stonily upon her, and for

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a second she endured and conquered a primal instinct to sound the scream of mortal combat. What an awful ordeal this thing was proving to be! For in spite of her bitter shrinking from the girl, she felt with terror that a strange, unwelcome sympathy for this creature was creeping over her, and she sat motionless, caught fast in the relentless grasp of a situation she could not master nor control.

Clem Merrit broke the silence defiantly, with a part of her new, terrible self-consciousness still upon her. "But where 's the odds," she demanded cogently, "if—"

Mrs. Wines laid a swift hand upon the girl's arm, in desperate impulse to stop any admission, or confession, or confidence; and with that simple act, which might subtly have invited confidence, there came an inspiration to a deed so bold that she caught her breath hard. Under her touch the girl was sitting still and tense, with her color coming and going. At last Mrs. Wines broke the silence.

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"Are your engagements definite ones just now?" she asked.

The girl stared, uncomprehending. Mrs. Wines paused for a scant second, and then went steadily on, ignoring that last chance of safe retreat.

"Our country place will be opened in a fortnight. Can you arrange to be one of our first group of guests? This is unconventional—I shall regard rules later, and call—but I ask you to-night, because it just occurs to me that—you might care to come—to us."

Clem Merrit stared. Suddenly she smiled generously. "That 's no matter about the calling," she said cordially. "Not between us. Run in any time. We 're suite A4. Yes, I 'll come. I have n't got so many summer invitations that I can't arrange it. Of course I 've just met you," she added elaborately; "but I know Reggie, and I reckon it is n't your house any more than it is his."

All her old *sang-froid* returned with a

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rush, and with it her brilliant, happy smile. "There comes Reggie," she added quickly, "looking all ways to see me here, with you." She laughed with a cordial appreciation of the young man's state of mind.

"I made sure you 'd given me the slip," she said freely to him, as he joined them.

It was at a great personal disadvantage that Reggie stood before the two women, a fact which he realized without adding thereby to his ease. That his mother had not looked at him once only added to his inner discomfort, however much it may have saved additional outward embarrassment. He sought for words, and found them not, save the conventional reminder of the purpose of his seeking.

As Clem Merrit adjusted her filmy skirts, preparatory to another rhythmic flight, Mrs. Wines responded conventionally.

"Yes, I am glad to have met you," she murmured. The words were of the flattest, but she was incapable then of attaining any further verbal achievement. She was look-

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ing at them both now with her *grande dame* air, hers so much by nature that it slipped at times over her sincerest cordiality, and under its influence a touch of her new embarrassment came back to Clem. Reggie saw both things, his mother's hauteur and Clem Merrit's confusion; and he threw back his shoulders with a gesture which his mother knew, and turned to the girl.

"I must hurry you away," he reminded her boyishly, "if you care for any of this two-step."

"I do care," said the girl. "We 'll vamoose then. See you later, Mrs. Wines."

The mother watched them drift away, her ears smitten with screaming echoes of the girl's parting words, tainted with the verbiage of the streets, wrested from the depths of her resources to cover her unwelcome confusion. If she could have been deceived in the girl's manner and words, there was that in Reggie's bearing, a new-found manhood showing through his boyish confusion, which made her feel

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the seriousness of the situation as she had never felt it. With a perception new to him, he had felt the unseen stress of the last moment, and there was no mistaking the fact that he had gone to the girl's defense against his mother.

And she, his mother, what had she done? The girl would come, of course. . . . Her heart stood still with fear. What had she done? . . . At last she put Virginia in other hands for the remainder of the evening, and went away to try to reason out what has no reason to it, ever—the first serious love experience of one's first and only born.

AND while his mother faced a sleepless night, her young son was listening with a great and growing wonder to the glad tidings which his beautiful companion was gleefully imparting to him.

"It's fine, Reggie," she concluded heartily. "With all the fun you say there is there! And your mother's *lovely*! I know she thought it was queer we had n't

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met before. I told her you were shy, that it was n't my fault! I 've kept telling you we 'd like each other. Over yonder it 's less crowded. Come on, Reggie. Let 's get out of the push!"

IV

TWO weeks later Lorimer walked down a country station platform to meet his young host waiting for him in a natty run-about.

"Glad to see you, old man!" he called out, with a fair assumption of the man about town which vastly amused Lorimer. "It 's a jolly fine thing, your getting down here to-night. Nobody 's here yet, and we 'll have things our own way." He reached down a strong arm for Lorimer's suit cases. "Give Matthews your checks. He 'll fetch the rest of your traps. Jump in."

"So no one 's here," said Lorimer, after he had complied with Reggie's mandate, and while they were swinging across the tracks toward the road which led to The Pines. "I was fearful that everything would be in full swing or settled down."

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"Things have n't started yet," replied the young host. "Vee came over here with mother a week ago, and helped straighten things out while the workmen were still here, and I got here just day before yesterday. I waited over—wanted to bring Jack Lowe with me, but he got stuck on a shabby piece of rock and some rotting seaweed, and would n't budge. He said he 'd been looking for that 'tone' for five years, and he 's sitting down there on a bit of beach right now, painting for fair life. What have you been doing since you dropped us all like hot cakes, and pegged back to town?"

"I had to do some work over again," replied Lorimer. "Don't you mention these last two weeks to me again. I rejoice, Reggie, that you 're no incipient genius!"

"Me!" ejaculated Reggie, with superb disregard of his parts of speech. "Thank God, no! I don't mind the college work, since you 've let me off that hanged math.; but I 'm going into Wall Street, and corner something, as soon as you let me up on college. Not but what it 's all right for

another year, considering I 'm Senior then; but after that it's high time I was out fishing in a little pond all for myself."

"I thought you were going to travel for a year or two," Lorimer observed thoughtlessly. The boy's face flushed.

"That 's all off," he said hurriedly. "I 'll be of age by then—I won't have time to loaf round seeing things. I 'll have to be doing something—making my pile." He laughed nervously.

"Tell you," he added quickly, without waiting for comment upon his sudden change of plans, comment indeed which Lorimer hesitated to offer, "I want you to do a nice little favor for me this week. There 's going to be a crowd here so mixed, it brings tears to my eyes to think of it, and I don't get the hang of the confounded situation, how mother ever came to mix it so; and even if Cora Taylor did get typhoid, there was n't any pressing need of mother 's rushing round to fill her place. Now, you 'll do the square thing, won't you, old man, and make things comfort-

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able, for she likes you down to the ground; said you were a good sort, and a fine fellow, and I don't want her to feel left out of it or uncomfortable; and you never can tell how the other confounded girls are going to jump."

Lorimer so far forgot his great fatigue as to turn fully half about, that he might better survey his incoherent host.

"You don't mind stopping that patter to do a little easy talking now, do you?" he inquired with much pathos.

Reggie cut at his well-going animal with reprehensible abstraction. "Yes, I do mind!" he said firmly. "Some things I don't care to talk over, and between men there's no use. You can understand things without confounded talking. But you keep an eye to the wind, and an ear to the ground, and do what you think ought to be done, when it ought to be done; and even then, even *you* can't mix oil and water. It's a hanged unlucky deal!"

They had entered the gate which marked the beginning of the Wines estate, and

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were speeding rapidly along the pine-lined avenue which led to the house. Lorimer began to whistle mournfully the latest thing in sentimental song lore, and did not speak until the journey was ended, and Reggie had deposited him unceremoniously at the short branch driveway which led directly to the house.

"I 'll just get around to the stables," he said easily, "and finish arrangements for meeting that mob to-morrow, and you might take your things, too; you may need 'em before I get back."

So Lorimer, still whistling dismally, went slowly up the foot-path with a suit case, and was met at the veranda steps by his hostess and his cousin, and Reggie's inhospitality was mourned over, and Lorimer was comforted with flagons of whatever nature he wished.

That night dinner was a small affair for four, served on a screened veranda overlooking the ocean, which was radiant with color and loveliness. The dinner was satisfying and delightful, yet a certain restraint

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hung over them all. Reggie frowned portentously to himself more than once. Virginia sat through the silences, busy with her own thoughts, the only one entirely unaffected by the slight strain of the hour. Mrs. Wines was openly abstracted, and Lorimer followed the example of those about him, and indulged in grateful repose.

An hour or so after dinner, while they were sitting quietly about the bare table, Virginia slipped away to the music-room, to which place she soon summoned Reggie, and began a laborious task of putting him through a rehearsal of a new effort in topical songs, a proceeding which bade fair to consume the evening, since the song was quite new, and young Mr. Wines's ear was notoriously poor. And then at last Mrs. Wines turned to Lorimer, lying lazily back in his chair.

"You left us suddenly, Drake," she murmured. "No special summons?"

Lorimer explained his recall, and received satisfying sympathy. "In fact," he concluded, "I 've been too busy to do

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more than wire you to-day that I hoped to get down to-night. I expected to break into things sadly, and I find I am a first arrival."

"Yes," Mrs. Wines assented absently. After a moment she roused herself. "I, too, changed some plans," she said. "I am intending to ask your coöperation, Drake, in making a delicate experiment more of a success than it can possibly be without it. Two weeks ago I did a thing on pure impulse—"

There fell a lingering pause; Lorimer wriggled further down in his chair. A cooler breeze swept up to them from the sea. He smiled faintly; this was evidently the bothersome crystal which had disturbed young Reginald's peace, about to be set free from the matrix, if figure might be pressed so far. It was an odd thing to find Mrs. Wines uncertain over any act of hers; to discover that she had acted at last on something other than pure, sweet reason. It was she who broke the stillness.

"In two days Miss Merrit joins us here."

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Life, after all, holds surprises, and Mr. Lorimer sat slowly up; only to sink deeper into his chair. Was mere man ever to arrive at the ultimate analysis of the feminine heart, that startling seat of trouble and uprising, sedition and revolution, which has swayed the world since the world began!

As the silence did not lift, Lorimer rightly concluded the next move in the little game to be his.

"Really!" he murmured. "You 'll find her an addition, no doubt." His lips curved into a smile which was almost a sneer. How exquisitely cruel the gentlest of women could prove themselves! From the music-room came the insistent sound of the piano as Virginia's steel-strung fingers thumped emphatic time for Reggie's new song and *pas de seul*. Lorimer's eyebrows arched themselves into a line which went harmoniously with his lips.

"Reginald, Reginald!" he murmured. "How much, how exceeding much you have to answer for!" Lorimer did not rejoice in a fondness for the all-prevailing

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ragtime rage; nor, his ear being acute to misery, did he find any pleasure in a seemingly hopeless rehearsal.

Mrs. Wines moved at last, emphatically, in her chair. "And you, too, judge me!" she breathed resentfully. "So does my son condemn my tact, my good sense. Does your judgment, being riper, go deeper, to the very springs of human emotion—devotion," she added somberly. Then she spoke with entire change of tone and manner. "Reggie urges that the group will fail to combine." There was in her last words a defiance mild but firm as the eternal. It was evidently as far as possible from her desire that the coming group should fuse into a well-organized whole.

"Farda Grantham!" Lorimer catalogued slowly. "A Brahms-mad creature! Dell and Eaton Gresham, unashamed globe-trotters! Jack Lowe, painter of the stream and the sea! One Reggie Wines, a Harvard youth with a nice manner and bewitched! One Drake Lorimer! Little Virginia and one Lady Frances! No, it

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does n't seem that the new addition will blend to a perfect draw!" He leaned forward quickly.

"It will be a little hard on her, don't you think?" he asked. "Just a little hard?"

Mrs. Wines flushed, less under hidden censure in Lorimer's voice than because of her own thoughts. She knew the rush of blood was great enough to be plainly apparent beneath the almost full moon; but she drew herself up with her own fine manner.

"Of all my guests," she said with hauteur, "no one will have the consideration shown her that will be shown Miss Merrit. So thoroughly am I convinced that I have acted on ill-founded impulse that I was about to ask you to be considerate of impossible things—to help me—to help her. I am not asking you, either, to interfere in one moment of the time which Reggie will doubtless call his."

"I could n't do that, you know," said Lorimer.

"No," assented the mother wearily. "It would n't be best, of course."

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Again Lorimer's smile came and went. They agreed on the vital question, but for totally different reasons. He reflected that women's methods, when they found themselves in tight places, were often radically unscrupulous, and he discovered, with a certain disappointment, that this woman's intense absorption in what was to her the greatest phase of the pitiless problem before her, had lost to her temporarily her fine sense of values. But a part of her genuine remorse seemed born, not so much from a sense of her fault in having ignored the finer lines of hospitality, as from secret, hidden sympathy for the girl, existing side by side with the real repulsion she felt for her. The situation presented a living question for research, as to which quality it argued stronger for: the catholic breadth of sympathy in one woman, or the power of the crude human soul in the other, which compelled consideration.

Half an hour later Lorimer roused himself to find the veranda deserted; so immersed had he been in seductive analysis

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and synthesis, that he had not known when Mrs. Wines slipped away. From the music-room there came still the insistent thump of the piano, as Virginia marked relentless, patient time for Reggie, who was still struggling with the same new song. Lorimer got slowly up, and stretched his arms above his head.

"Yes," he said slowly, "it 's a hard situation, and an unfair test. She can't come out of it save in one way. And the boy will undoubtedly see, and she—will not—I trust, yet dare not hope. It 's a clever move, cruelly clever, dear lady of the gentle eyes!"

He went into the house, avoiding the strongly accentuated music-room with intention and ease, and went up to his own rooms. Once there, with a satisfying sense of solitude at last enveloping him, he still pondered on his problem with frowning brow.

V

TWO evenings later, as the sun was sending its last long rays across the tops of the dark pine-trees, gilding them to Christmas gaudiness, Mrs. Wines left her guests in their veranda corner, and went quickly down the steps to meet the latest addition to her group, whom Reggie had just brought from the station.

Clem Merrit stepped lightly down from the high trap. Her beauty was as flawless as ever, and her gown was Puritan in cut and color, yet, despite its extreme tailored severity, it gave one the instantaneous impression of barbaric gorgeousness. Virginia Garnet, in gold-embroidered silks and ropes of pearls and rubies, would not have borne the air of assertive wealth and ostentation which this man-tailored creature carried with her as she shook hands delightedly with her hostess, and went up the steps

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beside her, turning once to wave cheerfully at Reggie as he went on down the driveway.

"Not a bit," she said in answer to Mrs. Wines's patent query. "Traveling never tires me, and this little run down was great fun." Her clear voice carried to the furthest corner of the breezy veranda, and all conversation stopped, suspended in mid-air.

"Goodness me!" she exclaimed a second later, in frankest admiration, as she entered the hall and stared about her. Her voice still reached the group outside. "This is a fine old place. As much space here as in a hotel rotunda. Yes, an hour's plenty time to dress." Reggie said we might be late, but I wanted to come the bridge drive. He said it beat anything round here to kingdom come, and I wanted to make sure he had n't lied!" Her rich, unfettered laugh rang out. "He had n't. It sure makes other things look like thirty cents in dirty pennies. Yes, Mrs. Wines, I'd like my trunks right up. I never try to travel in a hand-bag nor live in a suit-case.

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No, I did n't bring my maid along. Her sister 's just over, poor soul, and sick, and I did n't have the heart to make her leave the poor strange thing alone, so I left Jeanne behind." She said it as if the maid were pure Scotch instead of the French treasure she was. "But that does n't matter. I don't have to depend on another woman to dress me, though I might have to run in and ask you to hook me into anything princesse, you know—"

As the voice died away in the far distance, every one sitting without drew a little breath indicative of various emotions. Mrs. Gresham, sitting alert and thoroughly alive, dropped heavily back into her low basket-chair.

"What under heaven!" she breathed. She glanced at her husband, and at Virginia. The latter looked worried, and the former shook a warning head. But Mrs. Gresham was never bound by conventional reminders of marital authority, and she touched Virginia's arm with emphasis.

"No wonder Aunt Frances gave us dull

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generalities about the expected guest and cleverly omitted the name—how *did* she manage that last! What's up, Vee?"

"Mrs. Wines just asked her," Virginia replied stupidly, "and she came."

"I think perhaps she might!" observed Mrs. Gresham with decision. "Indeed, if she had refused, it would have beat—kingdom come!"

Under cover of the subdued laugh which broke out about her, she edged her chair nearer Lorimer's; both of them reminded by that simple act of the afternoon hardly more than a fortnight before, when this identical group discussed with untrammelled freedom this new, bewildering addition to their quiet little party. Dell had been on the links ever since luncheon, and she was in more or less disarray, a usual condition with her, and one which never so slightly detracted from the fascination of her personality. Her hair was blown all ways, and her white linen dress was a far call from immaculateness; but she was a confirmed camper, and much roughing it

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in all parts of the world had brought her at last to the point where its conditions became her, even in civilized spots.

"One heard all sorts of nonsense down yonder," she said, in an undertone distinctly seductive, nodding her head in the direction where she fondly supposed the gossip to which she referred had emanated. "Of course there was heaps of gossip of all sorts, but after all, I never dreamed it *could* be anything like this *looks*—hm? Boys always *are* wild over older women—I laid it all to that—down there!"

Lorimer sighed and bent toward her small, listening ear. "I read it precisely as you read it, my dear Dell. So pleasant a thing to meet a kindred soul;—as you say, boys are always wild over older women. And so, since it is nothing serious, but a merely natural condition which we face, let us, I beg, treat it in that comfortable manner."

Dell grimaced. "How did Reggie dare invite her, Drake, and *how* did Aunt Frances ever bring herself to ratify the invitation?"

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"Mrs. Wines invited her, herself," Virginia put in, coolly, across her embroidery-hoop.

"Do you know that, Vee?" Dell shot the question at her, and, after the girl's nod of assent, her black eyes glowed.

"Without Reggie's invitation first! But if Aunt Frances is the only one blamable, then—"

She stopped short, her eyes widening enormously, and suddenly a sharp "Ah!" sped through her set little teeth. She glanced at Lorimer, who refused to meet her eyes, and then she leaned back and laughed long and softly.

"It is a pleasure that you find it so amusing, Dell," Farda Grantham remarked coldly. "I, for one, can't understand it. If the party were larger—but we are so small; no one here but Drake and Jack, and you two. We shall be thrown together constantly, day in and night out—there will be no escape."

"Precisely the point!" ejaculated Mrs. Gresham delightedly.

"The Carrols were to have come, and

CLEM

Andy Logan," Farda continued with distinct irritation; "but Mrs. Wines is n't expecting them now for another fortnight. It's a smaller party than we've ever had—and such an addition, to a small party."

"Precisely!" Dell uttered again. "Jack, would you speak for ten dollars?"

Lowe shook his big head. "You are speaking for me, with every elocutionary grace," he remarked, with a slight bow in the lady's direction. Whereat her eyes flashed again in appreciation of his enigmatic utterance.

"Well, I'm glad *you've* known her before," she remarked genially. "And if I remember, you think her a rather good sort in a way."

"We have met," Lowe replied. He lighted another cigarette carefully, and then, through some tiny smoke wreaths, he looked deliberately at Dell.

"You'll find her distinctly your sort, Dell, in fundamentals. She's hardly a woman's woman, but she's really a curiously interesting creature. In an abso-

CLEM

lutely free atmosphere she fits in without much of a jar—because there 's not an ounce of pretense about her."

"Then that should settle the matter of ease here," said Farda, overhearing. "No one of us knows a more delightfully free spot than this roof."

Lowe smiled a little. "Absorb the atmosphere thereof, Farda," he suggested. "She won't care for Brahms, but she 'll like your syncopated Cuban music and your northern folk agonies, if I 'm not mistaken, and she herself can sing you a song that will carry you back to the Suwanee River, if you 've ever been fortunate enough to roam thereabouts. So spare her, of your mercy—Brahms!"

"I 'll ask her to sing, personally!" Dell graciously volunteered. "Understand, Farda, Brahms is cut out for some days."

"And all that Brahms stands for, Farda," Lowe implored. Meantime Dell turned back once more to Lorimer.

"Don't worry!" she said lightly. "I shall take the entire situation with the ut-

CLEM

most *aplomb*. We are kindred spirits, you and I—as we both say, boys are boys! And I 'll be honey therefore to that funny thing up yonder.”

She looked toward an upper room not far from their right, whose great beauty was a massive oriel window. From it had issued for some time a steady murmur, and now, evidently with a change of place on the speaker's part, there came therefrom a ringing voice:

“Open that dark leather one, and take out the top tray. Save all the tissue paper; I did n't bring any more, and I may pick up any time and get out. Lay that tray on the floor and open that trunk yonder. Get out the petticoats in it, those two yellow silk ones, and the chiffon ones. Find the slippers and stockings to match them. Never mind my hair; I 'm tending to that. Open that box and hand me the pins in it. Then hand me that powder-box—the whole thing.”

Mrs. Gresham leaned slightly forward, her whole childish body tense. She was

CLEM

shamelessly listening, and after a slight break, the voice went ringing on:

"Give a good shake to those skirts and fluff the bottom flounces. You 're Mrs. Wines's maid? I won't need you much; but when I do, I want you on the run. Here, take this—here! What? My goodness, she 'll never know unless you peach on yourself—I never run about giving folks away. Have you got those things laced yet? I 'll kill Jeanne for putting them in without strings. Now take hold here and draw up the third string first—now put your hands on my hips, while I pull these strings taut—"

Dell looked about her with much satisfaction as the corner cleared magically, leaving only her and Lorimer in possession.

"I always did say she knew how to—dress!" put in that lady.

"I fear the unimpeccable Rachel has fallen," Lorimer murmured sadly, with considerate reverting to an earlier topic. "I did n't hear her refuse what her mistress hath forbidden."

CLEM

“Rachel has that gentle voice which is woman’s chiefest charm,” Mrs. Gresham replied with great condonement in her eyes. “That ’s one of Aunt Frances’ feudal fads anyway—nobody forbids it now—so don’t you run about giving folks away, either. There ’s one thing I like about that girl,” she added, picking up a book preparatory to departure. “If I were her sort, mushroom growth, you know, the sight of Aunt Frances’ butler would give me heart disease. But Forbes will not move this lady, though she may stir him out of his steel riveted calm. If he does quell her, I ’ll depart on the next train, if you say, and leave my baby of an Eaton to her clutches, if she wants him. But Forbes won’t scare her, a fact which argues something for her—what, I don’t know. I ’m going in to plot out my course for to-night. It ’s time for good resolves—we ’ve all been nothing but piazza cats for the last half hour.”

She gathered up the last one of her belongings and went away. Lorimer re-

CLEM

moved his glasses and began to polish them with infinite care. As he adjusted them, the voice above rang out once more:

“Work me into this like wax, now. Nobody can fool with this dress. Beautiful? Well, it ought to be! That ’s right, that ’s the idea. I don’t believe you ’ve whitened my shoulders far enough down. I told you this was double extra low cut. I know they ’re white now, but it ’s warm to-night—that ’s right. Now rub it in, down my back, further down than that. When I lean over, and I ’m liable to lean any way I want to—”

At which late stage Mr. Lorimer followed an example which he might have, with credit, emulated before, that of those Arabs famed in song and story, and silently stole away.

VI

MISS MERRIT kept dinner waiting for some little time past the dinner-hour, but when she appeared, the sight of her was worth a spoiled entrée or two. Her dress was one golden shimmer of palest yellow crêpe, with one dash of black, so bold, so ringing, that only an artist's mind could have conceived it, and an artist's hand dared place it. It made whiter her perfect shoulders, bluer her eyes, and her hair and dress more gloriously sunny.

There was never much formality about dinner at The Pines, but Mrs. Wines raised her eyebrows at Lorimer when the much-tried Forbes at length announced it, and he moved obediently toward Clem Merrit. That young woman recognized him by a slight and significant flicker of her eyelids, and her full free smile.

"First I see you, and then I don't," she

CLEM

remarked, as they traversed the long hall. "I had that dance with you down yonder, and the next I see of you, you 're here. Some of these people I know; him, and her—" She nodded toward several with much real indifference, and held out a cordial left hand to Lowe, who emerged at that moment from the library and joined the procession to the dining-room.

"We 'd meet up under an African bamboo-tree, would n't we!" she said to him gaily. Then she turned back to Lorimer.

"I owe you a vote of thanks," she remarked easily. "I never was in a crowd of this kind before, and I doubt if I 'd been here to-night, if it had n't been for that introduction you gave me to her. I like to mix with new people—people are the only things worth while, anyway. I think it 's going to be great sport. Two days you 've been here? It looks like I 'd missed some of the fun. I was just saying to Mr. Lorimer," she added to the entire table, as they were being seated, "that I was downright sorry you 'd all beaten me here by a

CLEM

day. I don't see, Reggie, why you did n't tip me off."

She smiled gaily down at the boy, and he returned an answer in a manner cool enough to prove himself, for every eye was turned upon him. Then her eyes fell upon the coldly classic features of Miss Grantham, and she nodded at her airily.

"He knows nothing does me so much good as turning myself loose for a ripping good time, and you 're right with me, I take it," she said.

Farda looked up in shocked amazement. Her lips moved slightly; then a burning wave of color swept over her face. She choked back some equally heated utterance, and turned deliberately toward Lowe, who was sitting beside her with a half smile on his face. Clem Merrit stared in her turn with open and equally great astonishment. Then she, too, turned aside with equal deliberation and far more coolness.

"Was that a facer?" she demanded under cover of the talk which rose in a swelling surge all about the table. To

CLEM

Lorimer's fine ear there seemed nothing in her voice but frankly amused curiosity.

"I fancy," he said deliberately, "that Miss Grantham—"

"You 're excused," said Miss Merrit promptly. "Good-night!"

And Lorimer took his fall with a laugh.

Another course was being served. Clem Merrit fingered the array of silver before her with indecision. Then she shot a furtive glance toward Mrs. Wines, and, as she briskly picked up a fork, she met Lorimer's eyes. Her own flickered for a second, and then she looked back at him boldly.

"Well, yes," she said coolly. "I did n't know which one, and I don't care for a bluff myself, unless it 's a good one. You 're sharp."

Lorimer indulged in another rare laugh. "And yet," he added after a pause, "I doubt not that you can put up a bluff when occasion calls. This little trifle—it does n't really matter, do you think?"

"You read me well," Clem replied

CLEM

promptly. "Yes, when the pot 's worth while I don't stay out because I don't stand pat on a royal flush." She flickered her eyelids at him again, after a droll fashion which he was beginning to recognize.

"All the same," she resumed after another pause, "don't you watch me too close. I 'm out of the running already, outclassed or underrated, and I declare to goodness, I don't know whether your sort is slower or swifter."

"No doubt we have among us here one or two merely average plugs," returned Lorimer cheerfully.

"Is that a facer, too?" asked the girl. "Well, I don't care. I can stand a man's come-back any day. Women!— And then, you see, I don't call myself fast."

Lorimer's lips parted in horrified haste, but the girl swept cheerfully on.

"Oh, shunt all that!" she said with her lovely smile. "I don't hold grudges. And women do ordinarily call me that. Oh, I know. Men don't, because men know me better. Women are nasty little things,

CLEM

don't you think, and I can't be judged by the general run of them. But," she smiled charmingly at him, "even a tortoise is faster than some animals."

Meantime Farda turned to Lowe, who was watching the progress of affairs across the table with interested absorption.

"This is dreadful!" she murmured. "And I dare say, merely because I say so, you 'll defend everything that 's happened; defend it to the last ditch, Jack. Well, you 'll soon be there, that 's one comfort. Your battling will be short."

"Oh, not in the least because you say so, my dear Farda," returned Lowe soothingly. "I am never moved by prejudice, as I endeavored to prove to you some hours back." He glanced into her pale face and laughed delightedly. "Brace up, Farda. "You 'll allow this feeling to carry you to lengths before long, and you can make a good guess, can't you, as to which side Mrs. Wines will be on! So don't give way, my dear girl, in heaven's name! There 'll be enough, without that sort of a fiasco."

CLEM

He settled back indifferently under Farda's disdainful stare. She was a girl of much cold brilliancy, who was possessed of much intelligence and was unhampered by any emotions, being a pitiless creature, to herself as well as to others. Her likes were few, and her dislikes were deep and lasting.

A few moments later they all rose, the men with the women, and drifted about the rooms and the verandas. For the time being Lorimer placidly disregarded Reggie's manifest attempt to corral the latest arrival, and remained in clear possession of his new acquaintance, though Reggie hovered near with an amount of cool intent praiseworthy in one so young. Half an hour later, while Reggie still lingered, he heard Clem Merrit answer a question whose asking had frozen his blood.

"Yes, I sing," she said calmly, in the full hush of an unaccountable silence which had fallen over the room. "My father always said he was going to have me learn to sing, and he paid double rates to get a big Paris teacher to take me. At first de

CLEM

Marronville said he would n't do it under any circumstances, but my father fixed it, and I studied almost a whole year. He said that for pure strength my voice was about the biggest thing he ever—"

Mrs. Gresham came forward quickly, her eyes shining like black agates, skilfully avoiding Lorimer's fixed gaze.

"Then do sing for us, Miss Merrit!" she cried. "Something—anything!" She would not yet meet Lorimer's eyes, but she came dangerously close to him, and across the entire length of the room she called to Mrs. Wines, whose face by now was a white mask.

"Do ask her, Aunt Frances!" she called, with a daring of which she was gleefully conscious.

"Oh, I 'll be glad to," the girl said calmly, turning surprised eyes upon the insistent clamorer, and to her intense gratitude Mrs. Wines realized that the situation was ended. Nothing could help or hinder now. Yet she flushed painfully under a look which Reggie flashed at her. It was very

CLEM

clear that Reggie excused nothing nor anybody; that he was passionately angry.

And in the midst of byplay and side scene, all unconscious thereof, and all unawed by the silence which still hung heavy over the room, Clem Merrit walked over to the piano.

"Most of my songs are coon," she said genially, over her wonderful shoulder. "But I 'll give you the Jewel Song—from 'Faust,' " she added in thoughtful explanation.

It was her entire preliminary, and she dashed into the aria blithely.

Lowe had edged his way carefully around the room, and by the time she ended, had contrived to displace Lorimer at the piano. In the pregnant silence which met her closing notes, he bent down to her. Reggie had given up the chase at last, and was standing, a miserable side-fixtured, against the opposite wall.

"Bully!" said Lowe in the entirely toneless voice with which he was wont to express his greatest pleasure. "Now, do me

CLEM

a favor; sing that Georgia coon song you used to sing while Denys was laying on his layers of paint—”

She laughed in frank pleasure, and broke into a rollicking coon song. By all standards of coon song literature she sang the thing rarely well, and when she finished this second effort there was liberal applause—from the men. She cast a quick, involuntary glance over her shoulder, and her laughing eyes focused themselves on Mrs. Wines's face.

Instantly the girl's face changed expression and color. What she had seen in the elder woman's eyes had shocked her. She caught her lip hard between her teeth, and then she rose, so abruptly that the piano seat was knocked headlong to the floor.

“No!” she said curtly, in response to the insistent requests, always from the men, for more songs.

She took a few steps back across the room, but half way over she hesitated, and finally stopped, for a second isolated, although a fringe of curious eyes stared at

CLEM

her, and half a dozen people stood within reach of her clenched hands. Her lip was still caught hard between her teeth, and her mouth was twisted and distorted, as if she were suffering physical pain. For a second—which was longer to her than many burning hours—no one stirred. Then, from the far end of the room, like a young prince, sweeping his guests to the right and the left of him, Reggie came imperiously, straight to Clem.

“The moon is just climbing the pines,” he said defiantly. “I ’m going to take you out to watch it.”

As he touched her arm a look of passionate gratitude shone in her eyes, but she turned to the men about her with all and more of her old, bold gaiety.

“Not to-night,” she reiterated. “This place got into my blood driving over from the station. Come, Reggie, let ’s clear.”

They swept past Lorimer, past Mrs. Wines, pale and frozen, past Virginia and Lowe, and stepped through a long window onto the stone-flagged veranda without.

CLEM

Another moment, and the night swallowed them up.

A little later, and those left unceremoniously behind made general exodus to the verandas. But one end, the entire east side, was left, by tacit consent, for those two who held it by priority of occupation. The shifting shadows showed now and then the silvery gleaming of a woman's dress; sometimes the woman herself in misty outline against the great pillars. And all through the evening's talk which followed, both Mrs. Wines and Lorimer missed one great thing, the sound of a girl's rich, strident laugh. It did not ring out once.

VII

IT was not yet six o'clock of the next morning when Lowe, strolling lazily through the dewy grass, saw a great red rose come hurtling through the air toward him. He caught it in his hand, and looked in the direction of its flight, to catch sight of Clem Merrit's bright head poised within the clambering arms of an old rose-tree which covered a summer-house.

"When did your alarm clock go off?" he asked her, coming close to the railing, and resting his arms upon it.

"It was Reggie's fist," said Clem. "We thought we 'd go walking, and then found the dew was so heavy that he 's gone off to the stables to get us something to drive before breakfast. Won't you come inside? There 's a bully view of the sea, and a seat, such as it is."

"I 'm satisfied," said Lowe. "I adore the

CLEM

curve of your mouth when seen at just this angle, slightly above the level of the eye."

"That 's all right," returned the girl, unmoved. "You 'd better go back to art and stick there. You may be a fair artist—they say so. But as a weather man, you 're on the blink. What 's the good of knocking around if you can't sight dirty weather ahead?"

Lowe's light lashes flickered heavily two or three times.

"You mean—?" he asked politely.

"That, as a press agent, Jack, you 're a shine."

His face held its impassive presentment, but far back in his eyes she beheld the light of understanding, and she leaped at it, to drag it forth.

"That coon song stunt did n't make a hit last night, did it?" she asked assertively. "What 's the matter with your friends, Jack? Don't they like a laugh?"

"Did n't they give you the laugh?" he asked. "Did n't they give you the hand?"

"They gave me the laugh all right, I

CLEM

reckon," Clem admitted calmly. "And the hand for that matter; clap out! What 's the matter with your friends, Jack? There 's nothing wrong with the song. And I 'm not more than three laps behind the right way to sing it, am I?"

"You sing it perfectly," Lowe uttered, with the finality of the recognized expert. "And everybody knows it—"

"No, they don't," said Clem, with the utmost impersonality. "There was n't a woman there that knew it. You men, of course—"

"You are doing Dell Gresham a cruel injustice," Lowe interrupted gravely. "Dell is authority on stunts of all sorts, and Dell appreciated every fine point, I give you my word."

"I 'm not in a position to call you there," Clem returned. "I did n't happen to see Mrs. Gresham—" She stopped and her level brows came together in a somber frown. Then she looked squarely into Lowe's eyes.

"I see myself hitting the trail for town

CLEM

in about two days, Jack," she said. "This place has got on my nerves already. I don't seem to fancy it."

"Ah, now, don't," Lowe begged. "When it 's really a delightful place, and considering the fact that it 's been so many months since we 've eaten at the same table—"

"Were n't they jolly luncheons!" Clem interrupted, with eyes brimming with laughter. "The lovely messes that little coon of Claude Denys' could hand out! And to eat them in that studio of his, where everything had a taste of turpentine and oily rag—you had no business there, but you used to run in every morning! And then the places we 'd drop into in the evening, you and Denys and sometimes dad, and I. And then, always if dad was with us, we 'd go, after dinner, to some of those palaces, and watch dad play baccarat. Ah me, I *love* to see dad with a deck of cards in his hand, just before the deal. Do you remember him, Jack, red and bulky, with his tie just a little twisted, and his hat on

CLEM

the back of his head, and everybody watching him, even the croupier ; and the highest players in all Paris just dropping over, one by one, to take a hand in the game? Ah! me, it 's nerve I *love*."

"Where 's 'dad' now?" Lowe asked, his eyes fastened with keen interest on the girl's flushing, rippling face.

"Getting ready to go down into South America and take a hand in some of the revolutions, so that he can get into a few gold-mines he 's bought," she replied carelessly. "Equador 's all tied up, and Colombia 's worse. He 's got the rover's fever again—that 's all that 's the matter. He 's just got home from this trip round the world with me—he can't waste any more time sitting still, you know, or just having a good time. He 's got to go *work* again. This is the biggest gamble he 's gone into yet, for it takes in states and kings."

"And you?" queried Lowe. There was a certain note in his voice which made the girl turn on him quickly.

"Don't you go to blaming dad for leav-

CLEM

ing me behind him," she said emphatically. "You saw him down at the beach for those few days—you could see he was *crazy* to get out into God's country again. He 'd take me—but I won't go. He 's been too good to trek about with me all this time. Anyway, I don't want to go."

"But my God, girl, you 're too—rich—to live alone!" Lowe protested.

Clem sunk her chin into her hands and stared down at him.

"Don't let my money bother you any more than it does me—and you won't say that sort of thing again," she said slowly. "Say, Jack, how do *you* come to be hobnobbing with this high-collared, stiff-corseted crowd? You would n't have said that to me two years ago, in Paris."

Lowe laughed a little. "Paris is different," he said lamely. "American girls can do anything they like—in Paris—and it 's simply laid to Americanism!"

"Well, I 've always done as I liked, you know," Clem replied simply. "And you can lay it all, always, to me."

CLEM

What 's the good of life, if you put chains on yourself? That 's why I think I 'm going to trek out for town day after tomorrow."

"Don't!" Lowe said again. "It would be an injustice to—everybody, if you do. You don't understand these people. Stay on, and learn them a little better. And if you are n't interested in that, stay on to let them know you. They 're all right; an awfully good sort."

"Usually I can size up a string without being held by the hand," Clem said, after a pause; "but this yard of colts gets past me. That Grantham girl 's got a sweet, fine nature, Jack! I 've got her all hung up on the line! Who 's the other girl, Virginia?"

She said it all without malice, and she laughed without malice.

"Virginia?" echoed Lowe. "She's a nice little thing; cousin of Lorimer's and special pet of Mrs. Wines's. Never mind the women. Let's talk about Reggie. You may speak freely to me, Clem. I am a dependable, grandfatherly person."

CLEM

"I 'm not talking much about Reggie right now," Clem said slowly; "but, so far, he seems to me the pick of this bunch."

"You put him over Lorimer!" protested Lowe. "And Gresham! And me!"

"That Lorimer is—what is he, Jack? He don't play ragtime, anyway."

Lowe laughed. "Why, Lorimer can play ragtime," he said lightly. "My dear Clem, Lorimer likes you—immensely. Believe me. You made your distinct hit with him, two weeks ago, when you gave us our palm-reading together—remember? That was an inordinately clever stunt you put up that night. I should n't have brought him to you personally, if I had n't felt that I was doing an altruistic thing—presenting two distinctly worth-while people to each other—thereby cutting ice both ways. You seemed good enough pals down yonder at the shore; and here, last night—"

"Oh, he's smooth," rejoined Clem, somewhat absently. "Smooth as a piece of sash ribbon; the sort that does n't get jolted easy; that can get into a cab without

CLEM

having to go back after his hat; that can talk right along, the same sort of conversation, after the supper bill's hit him in the eye! He 's that sort, all right."

Lowe threw back his head and roared, but Clem stared down into his face soberly enough.

"He writes, does n't he?" she added abruptly. "I read a book of his that Reggie had. It was all about this lot of people—people like them. Somehow—oh, it was good stuff, but it did n't seem to me it hit bottom—I laid it to the sort of people he 'd taken hold of to write up, the sort that would die if they had to live in deep water; a goldfish crowd it was! You know, Jack, I love an Indian, just because he 's got to have all outdoors to live in and off of. Reggie and I talked that book of Drake Lorimer's over and upside down, and from left to right and back again, Reggie standing up for it—Reggie 's only part Indian, you know—a great lot of him 's white man! He kept saying it was all right; but he banked all his belief on what the critics

CLEM

said about the Lorimer book. Every time I 'd say, 'But the man has n't got the working-man's standpoint!' Reggie would stand right up on both his feet and tell me that New York went wild over it, and old Drake had 'em all skinned ten miles!" She laughed a little. "Reggie's a good friend, and I reckon I did n't do Mr. Lorimer justice, after all; for if he has n't got the working-man's jargon right, he certainly has this high-collared set put down in black and white. I can see that, with only six o'clock last night to start from. I 'm an Indian, you know, Jack. I 've got to have a lot of good, clean air to breathe, or I choke up and want to kill somebody."

"Well," suggested Lowe, "vindicate the Indian, then, to the white man."

Clem retorted promptly. "Not for a minute! After all, the Indian does n't need vindication. He 's got his own code, his own laws of life, and if he lives up to them, he 's a good Indian, and has plenty of buffalo in the hunting-grounds beyond. I suppose it 's the same thing, only rarefied,

CLEM

with the white man. I don't know. I 've never lived with white men."

She smiled down at last into his heavy, kindly face.

"You 're sort of different from the rest of 'em here, Jack. I daresay you don't think that 's a compliment; perhaps not. Is it living in that queer shack of yours, just outside of Paris, with that queer gang you had about you; where anything you did was right, and nothing counted for wrong—unless you lied to a woman, or played with a man with an ace up your sleeve?"

She bent down to him at last, and tapped his cheek lightly with her hand.

"Talk!" she said. "Don't moon at six o'clock in the morning!"

Lowe smiled up at her queerly, his kind eyes fixed steadily on hers. "I 'm not unshod, Clem," he replied briefly. "If I walk here at all, it is of your mercy."

He paused for a moment, and the girl did not speak, but her questioning eyes were compelling.

CLEM

"I 've always said you were primitive," he continued cheerfully. "Do you remember that 'Eve' I showed you once, of Rodin's, while Denys was painting you—the one thing you liked out of a mass of sculpture—and you did n't know why? There was kinship between you—it always typified you to me. Your Indian code has served you well; you 've lived it unconsciously; you 've followed instinct, where the rest of us tentatively follow reason; and you 've walked gloriously all your years. But—"

"But—" repeated the girl imperiously. Her eyes had never wavered from his.

"But," Lowe went on, slowly, yet with no manner of hesitation, "it 's not in you to run away from any part of life, Clem. Good or bad, you 've never thrown down a hand yet. Whether you 've liked the cards or not, you 've played them—magnificently—"

He saw that she was reading all things into his words, and he stopped, wondering that he had dared to say so much. She

CLEM

sat, with her chin in her hand, looking far away into the blue sky overhead.

"He was the artist who said Eve's little finger did n't matter, after he found the workmen had broken the plaster finger off, and cast the bronze without knowing it—I remember you told me all about that. It was one of the finest, bravest things I ever heard." She laid both her hands out along the railing and looked at them with a curious smile.

Lowe followed her eyes and smiled broadly. "Well, did it?" he asked. "Beside the breadth of the whole; its splendid lines, its great life and greater spirit? Was n't criticism of that insignificant lack puerile and finicky?"

"Finicky!" she repeated. Her eyes darkened slightly, and her lips curved scornfully, but she looked at him at last with eyes that laughed beneath their flickering lids.

"It 's a good thing that I still have instinct—to tell me what a glorious liar you are, Jack," she said. "Well, I 'm glad I 've

CLEM

met you down here, in this gang of your own sort, because you show up almost more of a man in it than you do out of it. Because I like courage, and it takes it—to be different—here!”

“You ’re not going away—really?” Lowe asked her quickly, caught by a certain final note in her voice.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Clem retorted carelessly. “The Wessons—do you know the Wessons?—racing people?—want me down on their Long Island place for this month. They ’d be tickled to death if I wired them that I ’d be there to-morrow night for dinner!”

She glanced at him from under heavy lids as he stood with folded arms and frowning brow, staring at the ground, and something in his face made her add quickly:

“Don’t you ever think I ’ll be throwing up the game, if I do! I ’ve got a cold deal, and it ’s the best way to play my hand. Take my word for that!” She laughed rather loudly and with a touch of bitterness. Finally, she tapped his cheek again.

CLEM

"Your conversation this morning moves as easy as a cab horse on a sand track," she said. "You 're the champion rapid fire conversationalist!"

Lowe caught hold of her hand. "I know those Wessons," he said jerkily, "and their crowd. They 're not your level, Clem."

"I had a good time there two months ago," the girl said lightly. "I met them on the boat, coming over. That 's the way I meet most of the people I know—on the boat—coming over! I went right down with them, dad and I, and we had a good time. Nothing matters there, either, whatever you do. Nobody cares. They 're a good enough sort."

"They 're not your level," Lowe repeated stubbornly. The second repetition of the words seemed to goad her into swift speech.

"I 've got no level—have n't had for two years—not since I had that picture painted, and sat there morning after morning, hearing you and Claude Denys talk and smoke

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by the hour. I went to him because he was the fashion, because my father wanted a portrait of me, and whenever you said portrait in Paris, somebody at your elbow, did n't matter where you were, said 'Denys!' Well, he took me, and painted me, and I sat there and heard him tell you about turning down this Lady So-and-so, and this Duchess of That, and this Mrs. Kerosene Somebody from Toledo, and all his reasons why. And I used to sit there, wondering *why* he 'd taken *me*—since I was n't the duchess, and was n't near the beauty that she was, and since he 'd turned down a woman whose husband was full as rich as my father. I never quite found out, and I stumbled through a lot of columns of rot that the art critics wrote of 'The Woman in Blue!' Most of them said the work was superfine—what they said of Denys was all right, but I did n't take to what they said of me, the things they said he 'd done with me. They seemed to talk *me* over considerable. You know what they said, the sort of woman a lot of them

CLEM

surmised I was. They did n't agree, by a long ways, but none of it was very flattering—it started me to thinking, and I 've never stopped. Though the thinking did n't bother me a bit—till this summer. Since then—I 've got no level, Jack. You know it. You know it!"

She had been speaking almost inaudibly, but with her last words her voice rose. She seemed at last to realize that Lowe still held her hand, and she tried to wrench it from him. But he held it persistently.

"A big point of view is the rarest thing in the world, Clem," he said serenely. "Don't let motes hide it."

Her frown grew deeper, and her lips tightened as she looked into his steady, kindly eyes. Suddenly she dragged her hands free.

"Reggie 's calling," she muttered. "He ought to have been here half an hour ago!"

She sprang to her feet, without any other word of farewell, and walked swiftly over to where Reggie waited for her in his motor-car. Lowe continued to stare after

CLEM

her as she placed herself in the driver's seat, displacing her young host without apology, and he gazed after the car until it lost itself in the curving roadway. Then he took up a slow stroll back to the house, with his hands clasped behind him, whistling a monotonous roundelay whose words relate to an animal fair where birds and beasts congregate, and deal especially with the vicissitudes befalling an elephant and a monkey. This particular melody always denoted a certain state of Lowe's mind to intimate listeners, and he came up the steps of the house to find Dell Gresham waiting for him with hands uplifted.

"Heaven fend us!" she murmured piously, "that you start this glorious day—so! What is the trouble? And may I be permitted to help in any way, however mean and small?"

"Good old Dell!" Lowe answered gladly. He broke off his roundelay abruptly, and pulled down the lady's upheld hands. "Dell, I want you to do me a great favor; something that it not only takes a woman

CLEM

to do, but a woman of great social experience and instinctive tact—”

“My lord!” murmured Mrs. Gresham, with a thankful courtesy.

“And this is it,” Lowe went on, with the imperviousness of a raincoat. “For God’s sake, take hold of things! My word for it, there ’s gold lying loose in this merry little group, and Dell, you ’ve got a touchstone that ought to find it. And a woman’s friendship means so cursedly much more than a man’s can, sometimes. It can build up, sometimes, where a man’s can only destroy. Be a good fellow, old girl.”

“I suppose I could n’t have helped—last night’s break, but I ’m perfectly certain I did n’t try,” Dell confessed, with a charming air of penitence.

“Make ’em all play up! You ’ve got the faculty!” growled Lowe, as he followed her toward the breakfast-room. Mrs. Gresham turned on him quickly.

“I can! I have!” she said. Her thought was growing in her brain. “I wonder,”

CLEM

she emitted at length, "what *might* be made of that girl, with the proper—"

Lowe ambled quickly to her side with his characteristic gait, a certain give at the ankles like that of a camel in its native sands, but possessed of a natural litheness which gave his awkwardness grace. He raised his hands devoutly.

"Never!" he said in a tone which admitted of no appeal. "This is no part of any uplift movement, Dell. I refuse to be a party to any such trashy game. When mortals condescend to mortals, then truly do the gods weep!"

He paused as they reached the door, and held her back for a moment. "I shall dare," he said whimsically, "to remind you of this great axiom of the studios: There are certain things which should never be finished; the freshness of first lines, the bloom of the sketch, should be left on them forever!"

He watched her furtively as Clem and Reggie came in, almost an hour later, wind-

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blown and laughing, from their swift morning flight, and his brow cleared as he noted the manner with which she drew the girl into a chair beside her, and began to talk to her with that rattling fluency which was Dell's at all times. Clem rose to it, and, thanks to the ozone of the morning and of Dell Gresham's vitality, her poise was unbroken by Mrs. Wines's appearance, and the almost oppressive cordiality of that lady's morning greetings. Lowe, watching Clem with an interest whose genuineness excused it, was uncertain as to how much, after all, she had really perceived of the situation into which they were all plunged, so thoroughly natural did she seem, and so thoroughly at her ease.

VIII

THAT first unfortunate evening struck hardly the correct keynote of the week which followed, and yet it echoed through most of the days which came after; for Clem Merrit, that is to say.

For she had caught the jangling note, even so early, and neither the assiduous courtesies of her hostess and her fellow-guests, nor the outright, downright devotion of her young host himself, could dull her ears or shut her clear-seeing eyes. She had taken Mrs. Wines's invitation to The Pines for what it seemed: an honest, impulsive desire for her company; and she had accepted in that spirit precisely. She admired Reggie's mother tremendously, with a species of infatuated adoration at which she herself laughed; had so admired her through the first three weeks of her and Reggie Wines's tropical friendship. She

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had never, in all her untamed, wandering life, come into personal contact with such a woman, and her delight at Mrs. Wines's seemingly instantaneous response to her adoration was naïve and bubbling. But even so early was her warm heart chilled. Mrs. Wines's face, as Clem turned from the piano that night and looked upon it—Clem Merrit could not forget it. It held more than Mrs. Wines dreamed of her real feeling, and the girl, interpreting dimly and uncertainly, felt only bewilderment.

As Farda Grantham had carefully pointed out, the party was small. Consequently it was impossible for Clem not to see much of them all. She listened in a sort of mental daze to the talk which went on about her, diamond-bright; diamond-hard, it seemed to her sometimes; of people, events, arts and varied crafts, whose terminology was all but Greek to her, and yet whose drift she shrewdly caught. Sometimes she felt all but smothered in the webs of verbal finesse which this sort of people wound skilfully, delightfully, yet so

CLEM

futilely it seemed to her, about trivial happenings and worse than trivial emotions. No motive seemed simple any longer; double after double was presented to fleeting view, and was then buried beneath some light shaft of wit as an inconsequent thing, over which it was absurd to spend further time. In this estimate she did the table and veranda talk at The Pines some injustice. It was not superficial talk, because it touched hidden depths more often than the girl recognized; but it was subtle and polished, filled with brilliant hiatus so obvious to this little group of friends, that they honestly did not perceive its unintelligibility to an outsider.

From it all, time and again, Reggie rescued her. They rode and drove and walked, spending hours of each day apart from all the others, and no one said them nay. Both Lowe and Lorimer were attentive and interested, but for a day or two she saw but little of them. After that, in what manner Reggie hardly knew, his hours and hers alone together were swiftly

CLEM

shortened. She played golf with Lowe, tennis with Lorimer, took advantage of Dell's openly proffered friendship to exchange vivid experiences, and she treated Reggie's confused and growing misery with careless ease. For more and more, as the days went on, did the boy become sorely troubled. Something in their world had shifted; they looked at each other with new eyes which did not seem their own. The deep, dark pine-groves seemed peopled to him, alone with her, as the crowded driveways at that crowded summer resort had not been. And yet she herself was so nearly the same that he could put a decisive finger on nothing definite—the point wherein lay the entire secret of his misery.

This week, for a first week, had been astonishingly quiet, considering that several congenial neighboring families were established for the summer. Dell Gresham knew excellently well that her aunt had planned it so, but she woke the morning of the fourth day to find herself resenting it.

"I 'm going to be a promoter," she said

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enigmatically to Gresham, as they went down to breakfast; and she refused to elucidate save by her actions, which, within the next few hours had contrived to be all but revolutionary. Both Lorimer and Lowe observed with ill-concealed interest Dell's clever baiting of her aunt, which resulted in telephoned invitations to the Goodwins and the Effingers and the Housmans before noon, for an informal gathering that night.

It was on the afternoon of that same day that Clem Merrit sat at ease on some side steps, alone, with her white skirts sweeping carelessly about her feet, and her broad-brimmed sailor hat tipped low over her eyes. She had been on the links for an hour, practising in solitude a bit of fine play which Lowe had demonstrated that morning, to her defeat. By and by the Greshams and Farda and Lowe came out, and Clem, seeing them approaching, ended her solitary play.

"No, thanks," she said to their invitation to go around. "I've been tramping these

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grounds all day. No," she added to Lowe, who lingered by her.

"Come," he persisted. But she shook her head firmly, and retreated to the steps.

Therefore was she sitting in solitude here. As she stared before her, the human figures faded from her view, and her eyes grew vacant as their sparkle died. She was thinking, thinking.

Clem Merrit herself was elemental, singularly free from subtleties and quibblings and ambiguities, but the taint of suspicion was working in her now, irresistibly. These people, of what sort were they? The Greshams she honestly liked; in her terminology they were jolly and rode straight. Farda Grantham she smiled over with spontaneous amusement, for the girl's manner struck her as decidedly humorous. Lowe she pronounced jolly and straight also; of a piece with the Greshams, and still a worthy member of that Parisian group into which she had stepped for a few brief weeks. Lorimer—she shook her head with an involuntary little shiver, and her

CLEM

eyes darkened with the stab of a memory—a memory of that salad course at that first dinner, and her intercepted glance at her hostess. It was hardly mortification that she felt now; it had been a far cry from mortification that she felt then. But that little incident stood out, suddenly alive with meaning, from all the hours crowded full of incidents, many of them similar. And shoulder to shoulder with that memory came the other one: of Mrs. Wines's face later that same evening, after the singing of that topical song!

Clem's face darkened; for, if she had not yet shown the possession of that swift perceptiveness which is the foundation of culture, she had the instinct of the wild for insincerity; and the sight of Mrs. Wines's proud, pained face had told her, that first night, that she had been deceived; that it was not because of a personal liking for her that Reggie's mother had asked her here. Reggie—ah, Reggie was straight and loyal—yet! He was born honest and sincere, and, after her own peculiar fash-

CLEM

ion, that other girl was honest, that little cousin of Drake Lorimer's, who lived with, and was loved by, Reggie's mother—

Clem turned at the sound of footsteps behind her, to see Virginia Garnet coming toward her with a sketching-board under her arm, and a box of water-colors. As she saw Clem, the younger girl hesitated perceptibly. Clem continued to tap her foot in rhythmic time against the step, while she looked reflectively upon this girl, pale and saintish, another type from this new world of types; the sort of girl that Mrs. Wines could love so tenderly—

“Hello!” Clem broke into her own thoughts so. “Going out yonder?”

Virginia hesitated still. “No, I played this morning. I was going to do a monochrome from the Point. The whole day is so heavenly blue.”

There followed a pause, during which Clem continued to gaze reflectively, while Virginia battled with a strong distaste for obedience to the mandates of hospitality; but she spoke sweetly at last:

CLEM

"Won't you come out with me? Everybody seems asleep, or busy."

Clem sat silent for a moment; then she swung leisurely to her feet. "Yes, I 'll come," she said. "Not because everybody 's asleep or busy—because I can go to sleep myself, or get busy. I 'll just come."

Virginia felt somewhat puzzled; her kindliness had seemed to her so sincere that she was not aware of the slight patronage lurking in it, and it never occurred to her that Clem's words were a good-natured flinging back of the unasked-for commodity. Silence fell between them as they started down the road, a silence of which Virginia was uncomfortably conscious. Clem was entirely oblivious to it, for little memories were springing up in her mind this afternoon, and distracting it. Yet suddenly she laughed.

"Oh, nothing," she said lightly, in reply to Virginia's surprised inquiry. "You just have a queer collection back yonder under that roof; a queer lot, that 's all."

Virginia's face expressed doubt and dis-

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taste. "We all like each other very much," she said, with a bit of dignity, "and we understand each other."

"All of you?" asked Clem humorously. "Some of you are n't so easy to understand, you know."

The younger girl flushed slightly under the mild fling, but she volunteered no answer, and in silence chose the spot for their lounging and her sketching. Clem flung herself down on the sand, and stretched herself along it as gracefully and lithely as a cat.

"How old are you?" she asked Virginia abruptly.

Virginia glanced up in surprise. "I 'm twenty years old," she answered briefly.

For a few moments Clem watched the swift strokes of the brush in silence. Then she spoke with immense energy:

"What have you done all your life?"

Again Virginia looked up in almost cold amazement, but Clem brushed such conventional emotions ruthlessly aside.

"I mean it," she said brusquely. "I

CLEM

was n't brought up with girls—I don't know anything about any sort of girls, let alone your sort. I want to know what you 've been doing all your life, all these twenty years; how you 've lived."

"That 's a very hard question to answer off-hand," Virginia replied, almost childishly. "I have n't done anything but what all girls do: go to school, and study music and art, and travel. I studied art in Paris one year—last year—because it took me that long over there to find out that my drawing is very bad. It 's queer I had to go over to Paris, and stay there that long to learn that one thing."

Clem commented dryly: "I don't know about that. I daresay a lot of us have to go a long way to learn lots of things. I 'm twenty-six," she added, with a tardy recognition of the confidence which had just been granted her.

"But," she continued energetically, "after all, what have you *done*? Where have you lived? What—" She stopped.

Virginia raised her eyes to her ques-

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tioner. "I don't know what you want to find out about me," she said directly. And that directness, even with its implied reserve, appealed strongly to Clem Merrit.

"Look here," she said impulsively. "I want to know how a girl of your sort does live; what she does, how she fills in her time—I was n't brought up your way, you know. I never have learned much about women, and I 'm free to say that till lately most of them seemed pretty cheap affairs. Perhaps that 's because I 've never met just your lovely, fluffy sort before. And then, of course, women don't care for me, hardly ever; and I don't care for that, either."

Virginia began to answer slowly, reluctantly. She did not know this girl, and did not want to know her. Yet Drake had asked her to be cordial, and she cared much for her cousin Drake. And Reggie had commanded her to be decent, in a manner which compelled obedience. Therefore she began to speak earnestly, dutifully, but with some aimlessness.

"My father is in Japan now," she said.

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"He is interested in collecting weapons; that is why he is there. When I did not want to go back to Paris this winter to the school there, which was what my father expected me to do, he was very much worried to know what to do with me, and Mrs. Wines asked him to let me stay with her. Reggie is in school, you know, and she is very lonely. It has all been just school and French-conversation classes, and dancing-class, and art school and Paris." She stopped breathlessly.

"And now—here!" uttered Clem eloquently. She leaned further back, and watched the girl as she bent studiously over her work. Suddenly she laid one strong finger on the drawing.

"What did you call this?" she asked.

"This is just a sketch," Virginia replied uncertainly.

"But you called it something," Clem insisted lazily. "You said you were going to do something from the Point."

"A monochrome," said Virginia. She glanced up, and what she saw in Clem Mer-

CLEM

rit's face made her add in sweet pedantry, "A sketch in one color."

Another silence fell. Clem lay far back, watching intently the face near her. She had never hungered after anything in all her life, material or spiritual. She had played without protest whatever hand had been dealt her. What the gods had given she had taken. What they had withheld she had not begged for. What they might snatch away she had let go with a laugh—until this week. This new hunger which gnawed within her was indefinite, inchoate, purely rudimentary. But she had caught glimpses of other planes of thought and action, and this afternoon, as she watched and listened, there came upon her the first stir of an embryonic ideal, and it sickened her as it quickened. She could not speak, so great was her mental daze; she only lay there, staring with wide eyes which she dared not close.

Virginia began to speak again, restlessly, with determined civility:

"I am studying art just because I love it.

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My mother was a sister of my cousin Drake's father—there is where I get my love for it, they say. Drake's father was a man of very great talent. He wanted Drake to be an artist. But Reggie's father saw that Drake would be only merely good at that, and he helped my uncle to give up his particular ambition for Drake. Dr. Wines was a very great man. It seems queer that Reggie is so different from both his mother and his father. He and Drake are great chums. He is going into Wall Street, he says, and Drake laughs at him. Reggie and I are just the same age."

She paused, to begin again with the same effect of resolute entertaining.

"Farda Grantham and I went abroad together. She studied music. We stayed at Madame Vallormes's school. The girls there used to amuse themselves by teaching the American girls the French 'r'. Sometimes I can say it by itself now, but never in a word. Dell laughs at me because I say I am going to study art always, and so does Drake, and so does Reggie. Dell and

CLEM

her husband are great travelers. They lived in Japan for a year. They came home through India. Dell says they are going back there and be Brahmins."

"Mrs. Gresham is a jolly little woman," said Clem briefly. Her heart warmed suddenly with memories of long morning hours and lazy afternoons when she and Dell Gresham had talked with common interest and understanding.

Virginia replied with civil effort: "She is very nice indeed. She is very unconventional, though. She does so many things that other women don't do, perhaps would n't dare to do. Yet in her they are perfectly right. Before she was married she was the same way. But no one ever cared."

"Why?" demanded Clem quickly. She turned slightly, and stared straight at the simple child before her.

"Well," hesitated Virginia, "because she is Dell Gresham for one thing, I suppose. And then, whatever she does, does n't matter because, no matter how absurd she is,

CLEM

all the time every one knows that she knows every convention to the letter, and simply does n't care about it. And nobody else can care, you see."

Clem bit her under lip cruelly. She raised herself swiftly on one elbow and looked keenly at the girl. Then she laid herself down again, satisfied that nothing personal could have been meant. That salad course was in her mind again. Mrs. Gresham, it appeared, might have eaten hers with a spoon, and it would have mattered not at all, merely because she happened to know—and others knew she knew—which fork! She laughed shortly, as she flung her arms above her head.

"Just school and French classes, and dancing-classes, and art-schools, and travel, and Paris! And people! This sort!—

"I've had school—some. It came a little late—I was almost as old as you are now when I really had your sort of school, but I've had it. I hate French, but I know German, learned to speak it when I was a

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child—a pal of my father's used to talk it to me all his spare time. I've had French as far as that goes—and Paris. I've had dancing-classes, not that I ever needed them much. I never took drawing; but I've had music—”

She felt the slow, dark flush creeping over her face. She was thinking again of that long, long room, and the songs she sang, and she was bitterly ashamed. And she did not in the least know why. For even now she told herself angrily that the coon song was merely broadly funny, no more. She was not capable of going beyond broad fun. But everything about it had been wrong. It hurt her terribly to remember Mrs. Wines's face, white and frozen. Even Jack Lowe, with all his comforting attempts to make her forget it, had only succeeded in impressing it on her that only the men appreciated it, cared for it at all. From them alone had come her meed of applause. She had never cared for the applause or approval of women before. But here, she felt the lack sorely.

CLEM

They seemed of different races, these women here, and she herself. And why? She was trying to get hold of the tangle this afternoon. At last she went on:

“But people—this sort—” And there she stopped again.

Virginia hesitated a moment. Then she spoke clearly:

“I wonder, sometimes, if I ’ve had too much of this sort. I wonder if there are n’t other sorts as good—better!”

She dropped her brushes and pushed her drawing-board away, and stared absently out over the water. Her eyes darkened, and her sweet lips curved almost bitterly. Clem looked at her wonderingly; the words seemed like heresy to her who had lived all her life beyond the pale; who had not even dreamed that such people as these were in the world; and who, seeing them now for the first time, was filled with the almost certain conviction that this sort was the sort most to be desired, even though she, by force of what had gone before, were forever cut off from it.

CLEM

"You don't really think that," she asserted at length.

"Ah, don't I!" Virginia breathed. She caught her breath sharply. "At least," she added, after a bit, "I ought to know other sorts, if only to be able to judge them better."

Clem glanced furtively at the girl's strained face. She was shrewd enough to perceive that Virginia was thinking of her not at all.

"Oh, in this world it does n't pay to judge," Clem said, with a rather grim laugh. "The worst ones of us have some good in us, though it may not come out until our last hour. I've seen some men live like jackals, and die like—gentlemen."

She was watching the girl's face rather sharply. It was a revelation to her that Virginia Garnet could be so vitally moved by inner feelings. The younger girl spoke swiftly:

"I knew it—I always knew it—you mean that there is *always* good in men."

CLEM

Clem answered soberly: "I don't think of any man, living or dead, that I would n't say that of." And something impelled her to add, "It takes death though, to bring the good out of some men. And nobody wants to live with a jackal, even if he is able to die like a gentleman."

"You 've known a great many men," Virginia asserted. "Do you think a man *can* love—two women?"

Clem laughed. "Can!" she repeated eloquently. "They do; three—four—and on up."

"I mean at one time," Virginia added.

"Perhaps not four at a time," Clem returned frivolously, "but two easily—they do it constantly—love two women."

"I mean really love," Virginia insisted gently. She was looking far into Clem's eyes, and Clem, rather startled by the intensity of the gaze, checked herself, with a slight frown.

"Oh, well, I don't," she said. "That 's too rare to talk about."

A few moments of silence fell between

CLEM

them. Clem's hands were clasped lazily behind her head, and she started slightly when Virginia's voice broke the pause.

"I knew a man once," she said quickly—then her face flushed fiercely, and her white throat throbbed.

"I knew a man once," she repeated in a changed voice, "who told me—that he loved a woman—with a sort of evil fascination—and loved—a girl too, better, far better, than he could love this woman—Do you think that that 's *true*?"

Clem stared steadily at the girl from under half-closed lids. It was all very transparent, and very young; but for the first time in her memory, Clem Merrit shrank from her knowledge of life. She could not remember the time when she had illusions, but she knew that this girl beside her was arrayed in them, despite this one evident sad rent; and the perception made her hesitate.

"Why, it could be *true* enough," she said slowly. "But why did he run around telling it—to anybody? Why did n't he go

CLEM

off under the stars and fight it out, face to face with himself?"

"He should n't have told?" Virginia queried vaguely. "Not any one? Not even the girl—to explain to her why he had to leave her—"

"My God!" murmured Clem Merrit, very slowly. She drew herself to a sitting posture, and fixed a level gaze upon the waters. "I 'd hate to tell you what I think about that," she threw over her shoulder at Virginia.

"But I wish you would," the girl persisted. "It 's—interesting. I wish you would tell me."

"How old was that man?" Clem asked curtly. "Thirty-five! And an up-to-date man, eh! Well, he was n't that big a fool. And if he was n't a fool, a man like that, he 's a rascal."

Virginia spoke with a sharp catch in her voice. "That is what my cousin Drake said. Exactly what he thought."

"Well, your cousin Drake 's an experienced sort," said Clem dryly. "He ought

CLEM

to know." She hesitated a moment, and then she asked: "That other man—he is n't among your sort?"

"No," said Virginia dully.

Clem leaned back again against her rock, and watched the girl as she gathered up her drawing-materials restlessly. It had all been an unwitting confession of a girl's first, foolish love, and Clem's heart warmed to this childish thing quite as fervently as if Virginia had voluntarily confided in her. It was a new experience for Clem, to hear a woman's confidence, and she cherished it avidly. This girl, shielded like a flower from life, until she knew nothing of life—Clem wondered longingly what a girlhood like this girl's must be.

"Just school and travel, and classes, and people—this sort. I 've had some of the school, and the travel; but people—" There she stopped again.

"You 've had people," Virginia said longingly. "The sort to make you *certain* of yourself; but my whole life has gone

CLEM

for nothing but to make me altogether uncertain."

Clem laughed a little grimly. "It 's affected you that way too," she said musingly. "And yet your people seem certain enough. They 've got no doubts. And I 've not had many in my life. It 's easy to see clear when you see only one side."

Then she drew herself up. She knew nothing of the literature of the confessional, but she had the instinct of that incomparable guider of souls who gave but two minutes to confession on the plea that it is too dangerous a relaxation. Behind them they heard the shrill whistle of an afternoon train.

"Shall we go back?" Virginia asked, the spell that was on her broken now by Clem's stirring. "Dinner is early to-night, on account of the Goodwins, and the Effingers, and the rest, coming over for the evening."

When they reached the house, after a rather silent walk, they found Reggie there, just arrived from town, whither he

CLEM

had gone on some pressing call that morning.

"I got all your traps and Dell's, Vee," he said. "I also dropped into that roof garden, and got the swing of that infernal ragtime you were trying to drill into me a while back. See!"

On the top step he executed a marvelously intricate clog, glancing beyond Virginia's smiling eyes to Clem. She was laughing too, but a look lurked within her eyes which he had never seen there before, and he was fairly conversant, too, with those bits of blue. He sprang down immediately and came toward her. Perhaps he had never looked so boyish, and so altogether lovable.

"Dell 's calling you, Vee," he said shamelessly. "I hear her. Anyway, this cart 's not built for three. And Miss Mer-rit needs a bit of fast driving to tone her up."

He came close to her as she stood on the graveled pathway. Just now Reggie was essentially a young and healthy animal,

CLEM

with a healthy scorn of mental subtleties and psychological riddles. Yet, from the very facts of his birth and environment, he had within him perceptions and feelings not animal, nor material, and these intangible things took hold of him and gripped him as he looked into Clem's pale face. Virginia went up the steps and disappeared within the house; Reggie noted the fact over his broad shoulder. Then he looked at Clem with lovable mastery.

"Get in," he said briefly. But she did not move, merely looked at him steadily, with dumb contemplation and unworded questioning. He advanced a step nearer.

"What 's up?" he asked. "Has any one—"

He stopped because he could not go on. It was a question hard to finish; it conceded too much of possibility.

Clem's eyes turned suddenly away, darkening somberly. For the first time in her life, perhaps, she caught the absolute pitch of a ringing chord, and knew it. In that second all the questionings of all the days

CLEM

just past found their swift, relentless answer, and that embryonic thing, formless and nameless, which had stirred first that afternoon, moved fiercely within her soul once again.

"Clem!" the boy said harshly.

She faced him deliberately, with her shoulders squared, and her head flung high. Then she let him put her into the cart. In another moment they were off, leaving behind them a small, subsiding whirlwind of dust and pebbles. And the echo, on the summer breeze, of her ringing laugh.

IX

MRS. WINES sat wearily this night at the foot of her table. The next day would see the departure of her guests, most of them, and she was fiercely glad. This week had been one which she could never forget, and which she would have wiped out of all memory.

About her silent self the table talk rose to ever increasing crests. It mounted higher and higher, and it seemed that it would never fall; yet it had about it that instability which marks a mounting wave whose sure collapse must come, and she waited wearily for the end, with every nerve tightening under the strain.

Across from her, on Reggie's right hand, sat Clem Merrit. He had placed her there to-night with some ostentation; had gone to the length of exchanging a place or two to accomplish it. On Clem's other

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side sat Lorimer, and on Reggie's left were Dell and Lowe. It was among these five that the talk was surging to such heights of gaiety.

Mrs. Wines watched the girl to-night with eyes which were filled with fear as well as weariness. The fear was a new one, and had stolen on her unawares, to haunt her like a great shadow, bringing with it a conviction of guilt, a certainty that she had tampered insultingly with hidden things. Her fear was no longer the mother's fierce dread for her boy, but sprang from the shameful knowledge that she had put out a wanton hand and had bruised a soul.

For the girl had seen—there was no doubt of that; she had seen, partially at least, the difference. She was not crushed and broken; she was bolder and gayer and more bewilderingly assertive to-night than ever; her voice was higher and her laugh more loud. Yet for three days past there had been a certain gleam in her eyes, every sight of which had shocked Reggie's

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mother into panic ; which made her feel the cringing craven whenever she looked into Clem Merrit's steady, brilliant eyes. Partially, at least, the girl had seen.

To Mrs. Wines the proof of this had been plain, in Clem's suddenly evident comradeship with Lowe and Lorimer ; in her resolute pushing of Reggie to one side ; in his restless hoverings on the outer edge of these new groupings, and his patent dissatisfaction thereat. For the three of them the week had proved a bitter one, and to-night she felt more deeply for the girl than for the boy. She remembered gratefully now Lorimer's cold bit of comfort on the day of her discovery ; that Reggie would recover ; that a boy must have his experiences, his fancied loves. Reggie's welfare troubled her to-night not at all ; the love-interest thereof had long since vanished from all phases of the case. In this thing she no longer thought of hearts. It had become a matter of soul, a matter of responsibility for the spirit she had deliberately and sorely wounded. For the girl

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had seen. She was no adventuress. She was without culture or refinement, if one chose so pitilessly to analyze her, but she had perception enough to see the things which Mrs. Wines had determined to make her see.

Lorimer had helped throughout the week. And Lowe. Mrs. Wines discovered herself at the outset to be glad indeed that Lowe had known the girl before. It made his rescuing of situations less patent than Lorimer's sometimes seemed to her; although nothing could have been more delicate than Lorimer's silken manœuvres. After all, Lowe took but little part in anything connected with the girl's position in the household, and he was not in the confidence of his hostess by so much as the breath of a whisper. Yet she felt, with the guilty certainty of discovery which a criminal feels, that Lowe understood perfectly the situation, and resolutely held aloof, definitely refused to be entangled in so questionable a proceeding as this had been. But Lorimer had been openly devoted to

CLEM

the girl, more and more genuinely interested as the days passed.

"She is a most interesting type," he said once to his hostess, and in a certain way Mrs. Wines resented it; it sounded heartlessly scrutinizing, cruelly perceptive. Yet to anything of the sort in Lorimer the girl had been oblivious, unless it might be that in the last few days there had come a subtle change in her manner to him, a certain armed neutrality lying within her eyes as they rested on Lorimer's high-bred face. Yes, within the last few days there had certainly come a change.

She sighed wearily. The swirl of talk and laughter oppressed her beyond measure. How she longed for the night to be ended—for the morning to dawn. Then Farda was to go to the Effingers for over Sunday; Lowe was to go into town for a few days to meet some London friends just arrived; Clem Merrit was to leave for all time; of that Mrs. Wines was convinced. For Clem Merrit had perceived. By the next evening The Pines would be practi-

CLEM

cally cleared of visitors; Dell and Eaton and Lorimer did not count as visitors. Even Lorimer might be gone, if he decided to accompany Lowe.

Shreds of talk assailed her ears now and then, and from time to time she listened listlessly, smiling at the proper moments, but silent. When last she listened definitely, they had been recounting poker stories—the two best ones, by common consent, were Clem Merrit's. Now, as she came out of her painful reverie, horses and racing were the themes. She listened with set lips to the verbal proofs of Clem Merrit's familiarity with the Derby winners at home and abroad; to the names of her favorite bookmakers; to all the argot of the race-tracks. Never had such talk been heard at her table, and she shrank from its sound as from physical blows. She turned indignant eyes on Lorimer once, when he seemed not content to let sleeping dogs lie, but insisted on deeper details. She glanced at Reggie too, and the boy met her eyes

CLEM

squarely. He, too, was pale, but she saw again that straightening under fire which she had seen that night of her first meeting with the girl, when she had been mad, mad, mad! Unless the girl had truly seen, would come to her help, it had been of no use, none of it!

It was with animated and vivid detail that Clem was answering Lorimer's questions about various times of trial and triumph on the turf, and Mrs. Gresham's eyes lighted up with her own interest. She herself was desperately fond of horses, and she held to the topic after Lorimer sat back, silent and reflective. He was thinking of the real fineness of these rough men's stories, roughly told as they were. The girl's tale always had its point, no matter how rough-hewn the handle might be. Here was a woman who had attained, through some processes, to a man's standpoint of honor and conduct of life, and a man's standpoint on a few other trifles as light as air to the average woman. He

CLEM

wondered, calmly, how much of that which was really higher and finer had been lost in such attaining.

"Have you a stable? Really?" Dell asked eagerly.

"I wish you 'd come down into Virginia and see it some time," Clem answered hospitably. "It 's the one spot on earth that 's really home to me; the one place I think I 'd want to strike for if I was dying, don't you know! I have a fine two-year-old who 's going to be good for next year. My jockey? Jimmy Hinch. He can ride at ninety-five pounds when he has to; has good hands; rates a horse well in front, or behind a pace-maker. He can ride a waiting race too, and put up a Garrison finish. He 's safe and careful, and a quick boy away from the post, and he can have a leg up on Fleetwood—"

At last the high-crested wave slipped spinelessly down to dead level. Clem's eyes had focused themselves squarely on Mrs. Wines as she began to speak, and as her voice died in her throat, she turned

CLEM

slowly away from her hostess's proud, pained face. Once again, and forever, it seemed to her, she saw herself mirrored in that woman's eyes; herself as she was, held up against this background of a life into which she had never before entered, and of which she had never dreamed.

As she sat, her hand gripping fiercely the thread-like stem of her wine-glass, Lorimer leaned forward, speaking instantly, his words seemingly mere interruption; yet the girl's lip curled with pride and anger as she listened:

"I saw Jimmy Hinch last June, Miss Merrit. During the Saratoga meet he landed two 20-to-1 shots, two 10-to-1 shots, two 8-to-1 shots, beside shorter-priced horses. He's one of the few good colored boys in the saddle since the days of J. Winkfield. Have you heard that the Derwin stables have all but got him? I understand, however, that he's a free lance, still."

The girl picked up her wine-glass and drained it. She contrived to pull her scat-

CLEM

tered self together, and her voice sounded almost natural as she replied.

"I know the major domo of the Derwin stables. He 's crazy over Hinch. He won't get him, either. I may not, but he won't. You 're good to hand me what you think is a straight tip, though."

Her eyes blazed hotly into Lorimer's, and stirred him for a moment from his wonted calm. There is something about a roused woman which few men care to provoke. He was keen enough to perceive that she saw straight through his manifest rescuing of the situation, and was far from grateful for his trouble, and he was doubly annoyed at her perception and at his transparency. He was not used to failing so signally in finesse.

But at this moment, they all turned, by common impulse, toward Reggie.

"Here 's to Fleetwood, topped by Hinch!" the young host said. His words came rapidly, tumbling over each other. "Fleetwood 's worth even a Hinch. If he keeps up his present form, and works out

CLEM

the Derby time, he must go to the post, and we 'll back him there!"

It was a boyish rally to a dust-trailed flag, and in token of its bravery, the all-concealing talk rose again with a gallant surge. Lowe, who had been sitting silent and half frowning, bent at last toward Farda Grantham with a sunny smile.

"Brace up, Farda," he urged encouragingly. "After all, what do you care? Dell bets, you know, bets viciously. And why not, if she wants to. Or anybody wants to!"

"That sort of thing, its endurability, depends altogether on breeding," said Miss Grantham icily. "Our ever fruitful contention, Jack; blood versus—"

Mrs. Wines's face whitened even more, as she caught the stray words of Farda's unreasoning speech. She gave the rising signal to the women; but Reggie was the first of all on his feet, and his chair was pushed back with a commendable decision.

"We shan't stay behind, to-night, mother," he said. He turned openly to Clem

CLEM

Merrit, and walked with her down the wide hall. At the door of the music-room they held a short, sharp parley, in which the girl won.

"Everybody 's turning in here. I don't want to go out there to-night," she said repeatedly, as he tried to induce her to leave the house and its people behind them. She cut the discussion short at last by sitting down within a window recess, and the boy took up a defiant stand near her, with his arms folded, and a heavy frown darkening his brow. Every one was talking again, eagerly, with a keen sense of relief. The dinner hour had been rather dreadful. At last there came a unanimous call for Dell.

"Songs!" that small lady cried. She jumped down from a window where she had been perching, and ran over to the piano, looking quite Mephistophelian in her scarlet crêpe. She stood beside the piano, and played standing. She began to sing, a gay, English music-hall mixture of coster and coon. She cake-walked as she played,

CLEM

after the fashion of many nations. The entire bit of business was indescribably suggestive and utterly laughable, and for that, as well as because of the dinner and its nerve-racking incidents, every one roared and called imperiously for repetition.

As Dell reached the last stanza for the second time, Clem, sitting half hidden in her curtained recess, with her blue eyes burning coldly, saw Mrs. Wines enter and stand, unnoticed, in the doorway. Clem watched her with bitterly curious eyes. As Dell cut a last delicious caper, and crashed out one resounding final chord, Mrs. Wines moved quickly across to her, and laid a caressing hand upon her niece's arm, smiling the while into the sparkling face.

"Be our monkey to-night, Dell," she said. "Wear the bells for a full hour, and claim what reward you will."

Clem Merrit hurled herself upward to her feet. Had she followed instinct, she must have screamed aloud, and torn at something, be it flesh or stone. The call to battle sounded in her ears. Its voice

CLEM

impelled her. She had held herself under rigid restraint for many days, and because of that had suffered many things. She was leaving the next day—thank God!—but before she left this house of suffering and humiliation she must cry aloud her defense—

She choked back a strangling gasp of shame and resentment, and then she stepped quickly, silently, through the long window near her, out to the empty veranda. Once there, beneath the cold, pale stars, she flung herself in weak abandon against the chill stone of one of its great pillars, her bare shoulders writhing and twisting in her torment of spirit. She felt like a leaf in the grasp of her Fate.

But suddenly, with an inward horror, she caught herself up. Some one was coming toward her—a man! If it were Reggie—now—he must hear her out, must know—

But it was not Reggie—it was Drake Lorimer.

She faced him desperately, her body

CLEM

drawn to its full height, her hands clasped behind her, her bare shoulders still resting against the cold stone pillar, her blue dress turned to vivid silver where the high lights fell. She rallied every force within her, and with her first uttered word she gave way without further attempt at resistance. After all, even granted the strength to play it out, where lay the use of such a sorry game! This man knew it all, had known it from the first. She had, at first, all but taken him into her confidence—fool, fool!—because she knew from Reggie how great a part he bore in Reggie's life. He knew it all; had been the one to present her to that pitiless mother; knew why she had been bidden here; had watched and waited, as Reggie's mother had watched and waited; had taken it upon himself, time and again, to spare her, to save her humiliations—her high spirit sickened; the play had played itself badly out; and in this moment even her great pride went down.

As she fled past him with her brave

CLEM

greeting strangling in her throat, Lorimer looked after her; looked after her till the last thread of shining blue was swallowed up in the bend of the wide staircase. Then he drew a long breath.

“I am beginning to wonder,” he said to himself slowly, “what sort we are, all of us, held up against her! At all events she’s played a gallant— Oh, it’s damnably hard on her, curse it!”

And Lorimer, too, leaned up against the pillar, and stared into the velvety blackness of the night.

X

IT was afternoon of the next day. Clem Merrit was to leave, in company with Lowe, on the six o'clock train. The others were to go after dinner. She came down to luncheon after a morning spent in her room, a withdrawal which lost her any farewell speech with Miss Grantham, who was driven over to the Effinger place shortly before noon by Lowe, who did not return for luncheon. After that meal was ended Clem went out to some side steps, where Reggie was awaiting her, evidently by appointment. The young man looked worried and pale and altogether unhappy. They went across the lawn together, and disappeared in the shadow of the dolorous pines. Two hours later she came back alone, and went to her room, sending down brief word that she wished to leave an hour earlier, on the five o'clock train.

CLEM

At four o'clock she came down-stairs, dressed for her journey to town. She glanced at the great clock; then her eyes met those of her hostess, who for all of the past hour had been pacing the length of the hall. As the two women looked on each other, Mrs. Wines came to a dead stop at the foot of the staircase. As Clem stood on the lower step, she addressed the older woman coolly.

"If you 'll send an order around, Mrs. Wines, for the station cart to be ready, I' ll go right down to the station, as soon as I 've had a little talk with you; but I want to see you first. Can we be alone, in here?"

Mrs. Wines made as if to offer faint protest of some sort, then she changed her mind, and gave the necessary orders; and then she led the way silently to the library, toward which Clem had turned. When the door closed behind them, the girl motioned the older woman to a chair, and then, disdaining one for herself, stood before her, straight and tall and beautiful as a young goddess.

CLEM

"I wanted to see you before I left," she began in a voice wonderfully controlled, "because I want to tell you some things I've told—your son—already. I want to tell you what he did n't want you to know at first, that we were engaged when I came here. He said he was too young, and still in college, and that was straight enough, but I know now he was afraid of how you'd take it. I give you my word of honor I never thought of that—of your right to know—till I came here; since then I've not thought of much else. It's been a hard week, the hardest I've ever lived through. In one sense it's not your fault, and then again, in another, it is.

"I'd like to tell you the way I've been brought up. I wonder if it would make you understand, or if you'd only turn away the more. My father came from the East here somewhere, but he had to cut the place, and he went out West. My mother"—the girl moistened her dry lips—"my mother was an actress, and not a very good one. My father really brought me up.

CLEM

Sometimes she 'd get crazy for the life again, and she 'd go back to the stage, and I 'd be left with him. She did n't care for either of us, except when her shows got stranded, and she needed some place to come to. My father took me everywhere with him. I 've been on the stage, too, when I was a child, in children's parts, a lot of them. When I was fifteen my mother finally—ran away. Since then she died. I never saw her after she left my father for good. Six years ago my father struck it rich, and since then I 've had everything I wanted—my father 's meant for me to have the best kind of a time, and finally, with all the money, to make a good match. I suppose he 'd rather see me married to some good man than to hit another gold-mine. And I 've met a lot of men, but there 's been a small few of them I 'd ever think of marrying.

“I told all this, and more, to your son—when he proposed to me—everything. I 've said no man should ever marry me without knowing the whole truth about some things. He did n't mind; but I give you

CLEM

my word of honor I never thought once of how you 'd take it, or of his, or my, duty to you.

“You see, I 've lived all my life with men, from the time I was born. Bad men, and mad men, with just one law among them—might; but it had a whole lot of right after all—after you measure the civilized sort against them. I don't like women, and they don't like me. I wish they did. I never cared about it till this week, and then, all of a sudden, I got to hating all those men I 'd ever known—the way they 'd crowded round me. They 've always done it, but somehow, it all at once did n't seem nice. I 've looked at everything from a man's standpoint all my life. It 's hard for me to get a woman's view. That first evening, when I met you, no woman had ever laid her hand on mine in just that way before and I honestly thought for a little while that perhaps one woman really liked me.

“It 's been a hard week, Mrs. Wines, for it 's opened my eyes, and I 've seen what I 've missed and what I 'll have to miss.

CLEM

I know why you did it, and I want to tell you you 've succeeded. You 've shown me the gulf. I 'm not going to throw myself into it, but no more am I going to try to step across. It 's been hard to stay it out. It 's been full of hard knocks—that first night here, when I sang that song, and saw your face—and that was n't near as hard a thing as last night, when another woman stood up to the piano and sang a song that went ahead of mine by some degrees. I dare say that little girl is right. When people know the right thing they don't have to do it. Yes, it 's been a hard week. But I don't blame you. If I 'd such a son, and he was so near to ruining his whole life, I 'd have been brave enough to do the same thing.

“I want to tell you this, too—I 've told your son already. It 's my father 's had the ambition, and all because he 's so proud of me. As far as I 'm concerned I would n't marry a crown prince unless I cared for him, and I 'd tell no man my whole story unless I—

CLEM

"I saw your son this afternoon and had it all out with him. He blames himself terribly for feeling the difference as he has—you and me together—and he would n't believe me when I told him that his manner toward me has been my one comfort this week—and it has. He 's stood out against a good deal—for you mean a lot to him—and so do I; but it could n't be helped. He could n't help it, and you could n't, and I could n't. It 's been hard for us all. You 've flicked me on the raw, time and again, but it 's been mostly involuntary; you did n't mean to.

"I had to throw him over myself. He 's so mad with cut pride that he 'd marry me to-night—and he blames you some. He says the test among your sort of people was unfair to me. Well, it was; but it was fair to him, and to you; and I want you and him to know that I don't blame either one of you. He 'll see it straight in a little while, and be glad you did what was hard and right."

She stopped at last. Mrs. Wines raised

CLEM

her bent head and looked up at the girl. She half rose, but Clem pressed her gently back.

“Don’t!” she said briefly. “I know you ’re sorry it all had to happen, but it had to, and words don’t help it. If you want to do anything for me at all, you ’ll sit still, and let me go away without a word.”

She picked up her hand-bag and turned toward the door. Then she paused for a brief moment, and came back.

“There ’s one thing I ’d like to have you say to your son,” she added. “It ’s not the heart hurt that ’s the worst in this for either him or me. I ’ve never had much of a chance myself, but I know a lady when I see one, and I know a gentleman; and I want you to tell him that he ’s one, clear through. That ’s what ’s cutting him up more than losing me. I want you to tell him that.”

And then she went over to the door and opened it, and closed it gently behind her.

XI

WHEN Mrs. Wines had realized that Clem Merrit was leaving on a train other than the one arranged for, and that Lowe might not be back to attend her, she sent a message to Lorimer at the same time that she sent orders for the station cart to be in readiness; and it was in obedience to that request that Lorimer was standing, waiting, beside the cart. He was only too keenly aware of the progress of events; he had known when Reggie and Clem disappeared earlier in the afternoon; he had seen her come back alone; he knew by the wording of the servant's message that she had been closeted with Mrs. Wines for half an hour. He drew out his watch, and discovered that her choice of trains left her but little margin. He knew that she had intended to leave on a later, fast train, and he felt certain that this blind choice of an accommodation horror augured Reg-

CLEM

gie's ignorance of her intended departure on it, augured at least that it was incumbent on him, Lorimer, to see her fairly started on her journey.

He looked up finally to see her standing before him. She had come quickly from the entrance door, alone. She walked toward him with her old, free walk; but her eyes were black, and her face was pallid. It was merely an accident that no one of the other guests happened to be near to bid her farewell. No one knew, of course, that she was leaving on the earlier, slower train, except Mrs. Wines and he himself, and Reggie, possibly. Reginald the Rescued! Yet Lorimer felt a sudden wrath against them all, because of the loneliness, the seeming unfriendliness of her departure.

She came unhesitatingly toward him, and held out a steady hand.

"Good-by," she said. She looked straight into his eyes, and as she looked at him, a faint shadow of a smile caught her lips and curled them. Lorimer winced in-

CLEM

wardly; Lowe's almost forgotten words flashed into his mind: "She might have been *the* primeval Woman, walking untrodden sands, pressing the springing earth when the world was young!" Somehow, under the influence of that flickering smile, which seemed to reveal a basic judgment, he felt ultra-civilized—the world-weary offspring of a superficial age—he felt veneered.

He held out his hand to assist her, but she stepped lightly in without noticing it, without touching it, save in that fleeting conventionality of farewell.

"The station, Matthews," she said.

"The station, Matthews," Lorimer uttered, at precisely the same moment, and sprang in beside her. She flung up her head haughtily at the act, and stared at him; then her lips curled again, not purposely, but involuntarily, and she looked steadily away from him.

They drove in silence until they reached the high-road, and then Lorimer spoke again to the man. "Take it at good speed,

CLEM

Matthews," he said. Then he turned to the girl.

"The five o'clock train is all but due; you would be fortunate to miss it. Some one should have insisted on your waiting for the six o'clock express. You reach town practically as soon, and often sooner. This earlier one is a horrible example of the local accommodation."

"It does n't matter at all," said the girl briefly. Once again she was facing him steadily, her eyes full on him, with that faint smile still hovering about her mouth. As he uttered once again something conventional and, as he himself realized, utterly banal, she flung up her hand scornfully, in bitter protest.

"The scenery!" she echoed. The hot anger in her eyes deepened, she paused a second; then she turned away from him once again, and stared straight ahead.

"You know all about this thing," she began swiftly; "and since you've taken it on yourself, unasked and unneeded, to see me to the station, fairly off the grounds

CLEM

I 've poached on, we 'll not ignore it. I 've just settled with Mrs. Wines back yonder, and I 'm ready to settle once for all with you. In the first place, whatever there was between Reggie and me is ended. In the second place, it stays ended, and that 's all."

"I rejoice that you force speech between us," Lorimer replied. "Because I hardly see how I may have a peaceful hour again, if I may not tell you that every one concerned in this business, save perhaps Reggie, owes you abject apology—"

"Save *only* Reggie!" amended Clem Merrit proudly.

"Save only Reggie!" repeated Lorimer. "I myself have seemed to you responsible for a good deal—"

"You have made yourself responsible for a good deal," said the girl flatly. "That 's the reason I 'm talking to you right now. A good many people got interested in the thing, more than enough to show me that I was a mistake. Between you two, you and Mrs. Wines, you 've

CLEM

cuddled and coddled Reggie till it 's a wonder he 's what he is. She 's a woman; but you 're a man—you ought to know better. Well, the lid 's off now. He 's cut the strings that tied him to you and his mother, and—I cut the strings that tied him to me. He 'belongs to himself now, and it 's high time."

"I am thoroughly convinced that an all but unforgivable mistake was made," confessed Lorimer. "I 'm not talking about Reggie now; I 'm talking about you. You make me feel Pharasaical—when I think of you!"

"Don't think of me!" she retorted instantly. "And don't be at all disturbed in your even living if by any chance you do. Because, honestly, I think I 've got a clearer, cleaner conscience than any of you people can have, except Reggie."

She hesitated a moment, and then she turned full on Lorimer. "He 's dreadfully cut up over this, just now," she said huskily. "He 's such a beautiful, straight-souled boy. Help him out in it—tell him

CLEM

anything you like about me, that I 'm a wretched flirt, that I 'm an adventuress—anything! It does n't matter what you say about me, because—you see, he thinks it 's me—losing me—that he feels so broken up over. It 's not that—I know—near so much as the fear that he has n't acted straight toward me. Once, when he hesitated, after I 'd *made* him see the difference he would n't own up to, and his lie did n't come quick enough, I snatched at that—it was the only thing he 'd left me to snatch at—I could n't lie to him myself, tell him I was an adventuress, and so he 's crazy with fury at himself, thinking he 's no gentleman, when he 's the finest, straightest, cleanest—I could n't lie about myself to him that way, it seemed too awful. I hope he 'll see it clear and straight, and be sensible. You can lie to him if it will do any good—he 'll come out all right. You 'd better get him away from that woman, though—his mother. She 's good and high and angelic, but she 's no sort of medicine for him now."

CLEM

“What sort do you take me for!” asked Lorimer harshly. “How could I possibly lie about you! After this talk, after all you ’ve said, I can’t trust myself to say a word about you to him, for if I did—you ’ve made me feel as if we are, all of us,—snobs!”

Clem Merrit sat straight. “Well, do you know,” she remarked quietly, “I believe in my soul that ’s what you all are—snobs! It ’s not a pretty word, and you have everything to say for yourselves, from your standpoint; but from my standpoint, just now, you seem like a lot of well-bred, unconscious—snobs! Your little world, your little circle, your little lives—it ’s all that matters to you! And when any outside shock comes—like me!—you draw up like sensitive plants, touch-menots! It ’s been a hellish week, for I began to get your idea the first night I came, and you ’ve been one of the chief ones to make me see it more and more, ever since—with your interruptions and explainings and filling in pauses and all that granny busi-

CLEM

ness. And after eight days of it, of what that good woman back yonder put on me deliberately and made me carry, I 'm leaving you, feeling that, if to be your sort I 'd have to be exactly like you, self-complacent and pitiless to every one outside my little one-two-three crowd, I 'm glad, glad, glad, that I 'm Clem Merrit, what I am: a woman who 's seen enough of life of all sorts, to know for all eternity that no one side of life can afford to sit back in a smug little corner and say, 'I 'm It.' I 'm not blaming her—I 've told her that—she did it for her boy; and she made me see what I 'd never dreamed before, that I, or any woman like me, must n't ever come between her and him. But you—after all, you don't really believe you are a snob, or that you have a touch of it. You 're simply uncomfortable because I 'm a woman in an uncomfortable position where you 've helped put me, and it 's made you uncomfortable because you 've seen me writhe once or twice. This is naked talk—it does n't matter, because we shan't meet

CLEM

again, ever. We 're just making that train. Thank you. Good-by!"

In a strangely helpless silence Lorimer stood, watching the dun local creep slowly away. The coaches were dusty and grimy, and the sight of them heaped reproaches on him. No one, not even he, had insisted on that later, more comfortable train. No one had suggested, objected, when she took the matter into her own hands, and chose the first train, regardless of its sort, which would bear her away from the scene of carnage after the battle was ended.

He stepped back into the cart with tingling nerves. The echo of her voice still lashed him. There was something intensely primitive and direct about the girl's point of view, something which shamed conventions, and made most of them seem nothing but shams. The test had been unfair. Shamefully unfair! They had arrogantly set up their standard that she might be measured thereby, and by it

CLEM

stand or fall. And then, to-day, she had planted firm her own measuring rod, and had placed them against it, not as individuals, by so much had she been kinder than they, but as a circle, and had pronounced them wanting in things vital. They were hardly snobs—Lorimer winced under her use of that word—but the essence of snobbery lay in their manner of judgment of this girl whose white face had just slipped by him from a window of the creeping train, this girl who, in the midst of her shame, and from the remnants of her cut pride, found pride enough to be glad she was not one of them.

By and by he remembered her plea for Reggie. That must be attended to immediately—the boy's going away. It should be where he wished, with whomever he wished. Home was not the place for him just now; even his mother must realize that. The whole affair had been a bitter mistake.

As they turned into the drive leading to

CLEM

the house, Lorimer, buried in unquiet thought, started at the sound of a cry on his left. He looked up quickly to see a man, one of the under-servants, waving his hat wildly, and pointing toward the house, dimly visible through the trees.

"What does he say, Matthews?" Lorimer asked quickly.

"That we 're wanted, sir, at the house, as quick as may be," the man replied, and touched up his horses to swifter pace.

After a bit Lorimer spoke again, an odd premonition thrilling him.

"He was waiting for us, Matthews?"

"It looked that way, sir."

"He said nothing else?"

"Nothing else, sir."

Lorimer leaned forward, watching intently. He did not know what he feared, nor for whom his fear gripped him so heavily. As they dashed up the last hundred feet of the driveway, rounding the last curve in a hail of pebbles, he saw Dell Gresham standing, bare-headed, on the steps, waiting for him. As he sprang

CLEM

down and hurried to her, he thought involuntarily of a day, six years before, when all the long day through, her first and only child lay dying, and her face wore then this same pallid look of waiting helplessly for some oncoming terror.

XII

CLEM sank into one of the hot, plush-covered seats of the local accommodation, and closed her eyes. They stung fiercely, and in another second she opened them wide, and bent forward impulsively, to peer through the dusty window for one last glimpse of the station cart, already turning on its trip back to The Pines, to the Greshams, to that still, cool, flower-like girl, to Reggie—

Then it was that her color flamed hot. Her brain was clear and keen, and of this fleeting madness of hers she saw the absurdity as she had never seen it before; saw it with ultimate vividness as her last sight of Lorimer was lost—Lorimer, settling back against the cushioned seat, lighting the cigarette which was to prove no panacea to his strained nerves.

Against him, too, her color flamed hot.

CLEM

He had played a large part in her disillusionment of this past week, a part larger than he knew ; and at the last he had proved himself to be the bitterest disappointment of them all. To Mrs. Wines she had been able to do full justice, and Reggie, in spite of all things, had proved himself to be what she had always known him to be from the beginning of their brief friendship, a clean, honorable, beautiful lover. That stormy scene of theirs, far away from meddlers, in the sweet-scented, dusky woods—she was no novice at handling men, and during the last four or five years, she had worn, for a brief space at a time, more than one engagement ring ; but because this experience had been so vital to her and to him, it had almost slipped her control. She had said, and had said truly, that his deepest grief was the knowledge that in some dark way he did not understand he had failed her ; and she honored him more for this deepest grief of his, than for his genuine madness over his losing of her. Her life of the past few luxurious years had

CLEM

been spent almost altogether with the monied floating riff-raff of cities and resorts. She had known many men, but she had been thrown with few men who ever pretended to idealize her. Of all her lovers Reggie was the first to place her in a shrine; and because of his worship of the soul which he ascribed to her, and not entirely of the beauty at whose effect on so many she had too often sneered, her deepest instincts had leaped to do him homage.

Yes, of them all, Reggie had not failed her; and she loved him for it, tenderly, gratefully, after a manner of which a mother, even his mother, need not be resentful. Jack Lowe, indeed, had been her staunch friend, that she knew; but he, after all, seemed slightly different from the others in his view of things. Nonsensical things did not matter to Jack, as they mattered to others—

This man, Drake Lorimer—she perceived now, as she looked on him for the last time, that she had always been waiting for him to do something, be something,

CLEM

prove himself something, and in this ending to it all, he had failed, not her, but himself. It was all vague and unwordable, but somehow he had failed.

From the first he appealed to her, as a perfect type of the gentleman born and bred; from that first night that she had seen him, in that gipsy tent of hers, in which she, or her father for her, had volunteered to take Dell Gresham's place as palm reader for charity. She did not take books seriously as authentic excerpts from life, and she did not accept as undiluted realism Ouida's descriptions of the English aristocracy. But it was only through books that she knew his seeming type, and it had somehow appealed to her from the beginning as heroic.

She knew him before their meeting for Reggie's best friend; she had been prepared to like him for Reggie's sake, and had liked him instantly for his own. The first evening at The Pines she felt herself drawn to him with open liking. Looking back, she saw now how he had, even then,

CLEM

begun his shielding of her in many ways, ways which she did not perceive then, because of her frightful obtuseness, her savage ignorance. She had been at loss many times; she knew it, and admitted it frankly. Hotel life she knew to the last detail of its gilded fripperies. Such home life as this was, she had never lived before, and there was a difference. Yes, Lorimer had shielded her from the first; of late his deliberate care, though it grew no more heavily shaded, had seemed more obtrusive—last night for instance, when he took up the race-track patois so glibly!—she writhed in misery in the dusty seat.

And this afternoon—surely there had been a chance for him somewhere, during that last half hour; and he had not risen to it; had seemed to be seeking honestly some way, and had found it not; had played the conventional gentleman with all that finesse of which he was past master, and had fallen far, far short of the heights he might have reached. She had abased herself before Reggie's mother, but she reared her head

CLEM

proudly before Reggie's friend, and both attitudes were flawlessly sincere. She had told Reggie's mother, humbly, that she was not of their class, and she had told Lorimer, with hot pride beating in her voice, that, if to be one of them she must sacrifice that breadth of outlook over life which was hers, she would never make the sacrifice. Reggie had that breadth of view—ignorance, these people called it—he was not spoiled yet. But by and by, and very shortly too, he would begin to see, or rather cease from seeing, as this man Lorimer looked and saw not.

She pressed her hot cheek to the cooler pane. She was still flushing, in spasms of bitter shame. And her deepest shame seemed to lie, not in her own great lack of that environment into which this boy lover of hers had been born, as in Drake Lorimer's lack of that great humanity whereby he might have seen more clearly the wrong which had been done her. She had voiced it proudly to Mrs. Wines: "It was n't fair to me, but it was fair to you and to him!"

CLEM

Lorimer had felt dimly the unfairness to her of this cruel test. If he had but seen it more clearly, as Reggie saw it; if he had but voiced it, as Reggie voiced it, this bitter pain could not have gripped her so keenly. Somehow he had failed himself, had proved himself incompetent, where he should have been capable, had just missed mastery of that bitter hour.

A memory of Lowe's half earnest, half laughing advice drifted through her mind; advice which he had thrown lightly at her the morning after her arrival. "It would be an injustice to everybody if you go now. Stay on and learn these people a little better, and stay on to let them know you!"

A bitter smile twisted her lips. She might have done every one an injustice by going, but in staying she, herself, had suffered the sorriest injustice at her own hands; she, herself, had dugged the pit.

In this retrospection of hers she did not spare herself in any way, and because of her pitilessness to herself, she lost for a moment the larger view which would have

CLEM

shown her that she had left behind her humiliation and distress, as great in the aggregate, as the burden thereof which she was bearing. She could not realize, however, how fundamental had been her destruction of convention and tradition and the various undisturbed cobwebs of social customs and thought. It was as if some cosmic genie had brokenly suddenly in upon a little anthropocentric group, and had shown it precisely its rating in the progress of this planet to ultimate extinction. But this she could not know.

The trip to town was a continuous succession of exasperating delays, and the summer day slowly darkened into twilight. Once, half way in, they were sidetracked half an hour, that some special train might have right of way. In any other state of mind she would have chafed at the delays; now she did not notice them. She was wondering where she should go for refuge, after she reached town. There was always their hotel suite, hers and her father's; if she were sure her father were out

CLEM

of town, she would go there. But she could not endure the thought of a possible meeting to-night with any one she had ever seen before. She thought of other hotels. She thought vaguely of a last alternative, a swift departure for any point whose distance away made a night's journey. . She would call up their hotel in any case; but if her father should be there, if she were to be compelled to meet him, to face his interested, eager queries about her country visit—she felt a fever which was almost madness seize her. She must have solitude at any price—at any price. Her world was in chaos, and its dust was choking her.

When the train, delayed, belated, came to a stop at last under the station shed, she realized that she was weakened and worn with her fierce gusts of shame and anger. There was no porter near her, and she slowly gathered up her belongings. Station after station had added its quota to the mass of people who were traveling cityward to-night, and she waited until most

CLEM

of her fellow travelers were out of the car before she stepped upon its platform. Almost the last one, she followed the suburbanites as they scattered along the floor and through the gates. Her eyes were black with weariness, and widened with her mental daze. She went stolidly after the crowd, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Her natural shock, therefore, was very great, when, feeling her arm laid hold of gently, she turned and looked into Lowe's face.

She stared at him almost stupidly. It was he, definitely, whom she had planned to avoid meeting, by taking that five o'clock train. And here he stood, patiently waiting for her! She became aware then that it was Lowe who had been leaning against the gate directly ahead of her, busied with scanning closely the faces of the train's passengers. She had seen him without recognizing him at all; his heavy head, with its heavy features usually subtly lighted by their own peculiar, jolly gleam of good humor. But to-night there was no jollity,

CLEM

no irradiating gleam. As she continued to look into his eyes, her face paled sickeningly, and a great fear gripped her.

"What is it?" she whispered, "tell me, quick!"

"I came down on the six o'clock train, to catch you here, if possible," said Lowe swiftly. "I 've been waiting fifteen minutes for you. You must come back, Clem, on that train yonder. Reggie is badly wounded. There must be an operation, and the outcome is doubtful. He sent me for you. It was a pistol shot; a bad abdominal wound. You will come, Clem—Clem, you must! The doctors are here already, and the nurses, on the train. We must get back—quickly."

XIII

SHE could not have been persuaded before that he could be so gentle, so considerate. She found his arm was strung with steel as she, in her great shock, swayed against him. He led her aside from the straggling crowd, and into a retired corner of the waiting-room. There, as if she were a child, he put her into a seat, and then stood over her, his hand placed firmly on her shoulders, that thick, powerful hand with its thick short fingers, which could grip his brushes so masterfully.

"That 's right," he said after a moment. His voice held a note of courageous cheer. "That 's right. Brace up, for the sake of them all, back yonder, waiting for you, Clem, as you were never waited for and needed yet."

"Reggie *shot!*" she whispered, for sole

CLEM

reply. "You 're not keeping things back—he 's not dead—yet?"

"He was living ten minutes ago," Lowe said gently. "I got them by telephone as soon as my train got in. His one cry is for you—when he 's conscious."

"It 's very serious?" The girl's voice was shaking.

"Poor youngster, yes. This is what we know: Virginia heard the cry first, and ran to his room. He seems to have been busy with guns and pistols, cleaning them—there were several of his favorites scattered round—he managed to say that he was just starting on a hunting trip—"

"Oh, my *God!*" she groaned. She closed her eyes, and then opened them wide, staring dizzily into Lowe's steady, comprehending ones. Before she could speak, he gripped her shoulder harder.

"Don't call up horrors!" he commanded sternly. "Listen: We got help from the Goodwin's—they have a young cub of a doctor staying there this week—he was over and hard at work before I left. Reg-

CLEM

gie was, conscious when Vee found him, and at intervals afterward, they told me over the telephone. He says over and over, that it was an accident pure and simple, another case of not knowing the bullet was there."

He paused again, too long, for the silence suddenly wrecked Clem's nerves, and she began to shiver violently, in the warmth of the summer evening. Her face dropped into her hands.

"Oh, that mother of his!" she sobbed brokenly. "How she hates me—how she *hates* me—*hates* me!"

For a moment Lowe stood helpless, looking down at her bent head. He was recalling Reggie's desperate gaspings as he lay on his bed, still conscious, giving his imperious orders:

"Every man 's been *the* Gaderene swine in this business, but she 's got to come back. She 's got to come back. There 's a lot she don't understand. Drake 's no good—she sees through him—you 're the one, Jack. Bring her back, to-night."

CLEM

And Lowe had set out on his journey, with an indignation which every moment fanned to deeper flaming. The girl had not met with fair play—and would not; there lay the pity of the thing. Before he left he had been forced to listen to the half-frenzied mother's protests against the bringing back into her home of the girl whom she firmly believed had sent her boy to his death. He had left the house indeed, in the face of those protests, and under orders from the young physician, who hushed the mother at last with his hard mandate that no slightest chance for recovery must be let slip.

He glanced at his watch. The girl might have ten minutes more before the express left, in which to get hold of herself. She was still shivering convulsively. His hand tightened again on her shoulder.

"The boy is a dead game shot," he said quietly. "And this wound is a hideous abdominal affair. You and I can read from that. If he had gone off his head so far,

CLEM

he 'd have made better work of it, because he would know how. The thing in itself spells accident. I ought to tell you that his mother reads it otherwise—yet. But one can excuse anything in her now—he is all she has. When you see her face, you will be as merciful in your judgment as she is merciless. I 've arranged for a compartment for you—the surgeons and nurses are going with us, but you don't have to meet any of them unless you want to. Can you come, now?"

She roused herself at last, and plied him with eager questions as they crossed over to their train. As they drew near she caught sight of two gray-garbed nurses, and of three professional-looking men standing near the steps. As they looked curiously at her, she dropped her veil quickly, and she shook her head at a query of Lowe's.

"No, no. I can't be decent to anybody now. Let me hide here alone. When we reach the station, come and get me—I 'll be braced by then. No, no, I could n't

CLEM

swallow anything. I can get something—there!” Her hesitation was marked.

He took her to her compartment, lowered a light for her, closed one window, raised another, and left a magazine lying on a chair seat. “I ’ll send you in a cup of clam broth, anyway,” he told her quietly. “Try to drink it.” Then the door closed behind him.

She sank back into her seat, too dazed and horrified for clear thought. Only one definite concept had been in her mind since Lowe had told his tale; Reggie’s face, white and desperate, as she had last looked on it. And ringing in her ears were the words which only she and the sheltering trees had heard: “There ’s nothing left in life, Clem, if you deliberately jilt me this way—I ’m going to shake hands with the devil and his friends!” They were his last words, all but shouted back at her, as he turned away at last, and strode across the spongy carpet of pine-needles, thickly matted. At the time she had thought the words held merely pain and cut pride;

CLEM

it might be that she could yet believe that was all they held, but her doubts were terrible. She tried to get the memory of Lowe's recital out of her mind—it troubled her horribly—but the fascination of it was more powerful than her shrinking from it, and she lived, one by one, each separate scene which Lowe, in reply to her pressing questions, had briefly sketched. She seemed to see Virginia rushing upon the boy as he crouched in his chair, with the smoking revolver still in his hand; to see Dell and Gresham coming swiftly at her call; to see the maddened mother as she rushed up from the library, the room which, in all probability, she had not quitted since she, Clem Merrit, had left the house. She shivered over the hurried diagnosis which the young physician had made: an abdominal wound with the bullet's course an unknown quantity; and then, with a swift revulsion of feeling, she recalled the two practical, gray-garbed women, and the three cool, self-contained surgeons who were her travel-

CLEM

ing companions, and she shuddered anew at the thought of them, hewers and cutters of men.

Time and again she tried bravely to rally her courage, but the awful coincidence of things, and the circumstantiality of the tragedy, cowed her. That it should have occurred this evening—she could hardly have left the house before the tragedy befell! She seemed to know perfectly well what was being whispered and surmised in that shadowed home toward which she was speeding. Her consenting to go back into it—it was the least thing she could do, of course, and yet the greatest thing! To face all of them again; to endure all their curious conjecturings; to stand beside that stricken mother through all the critical hours to come; to look on, perhaps, while Death reached out relentless hands and took the only treasure of that widowed mother's life; to know that in such case the mother would go down to her grave, calling her, Clem Merrit, the slayer of her boy—

CLEM

She heard Lowe's voice calling to her, a great way off, and she struggled upward through stratum after stratum of dimmed consciousness, to find him shaking her anxiously. She looked at him at last with clearing vision, and then she leaned back with a sigh, and pressed her hand hard against her aching eyes.

"Don't go away from me again!" she begged piteously. "I 'll be steadied in a minute; but don't leave me alone any more!"

"You 've been living through the horrors, poor girl!" Lowe said. "Here 's your broth. I know it 's strong because I went out to see about it myself, and here 's some fairly decent sherry. Drink them both—Clem, you must."

While she sipped the wine, he stood beside her, looking down at her with a puzzled anger still burning in his eyes. He wished greatly that Mrs. Wines might see the girl now, sore beset and all but fainting. He was very sure that Mrs. Wines would not see her so of Clem's volition; that, be-

CLEM

fore that lady, Clem would rally her great courage to play well the new hand which had been dealt her. But he wished that the girl might be seen by those unfriendly eyes as he saw her now, weak and dependent and sunk in pathetic sorrow. To one who had never seen her so, and had never imagined her so, it was a revelation.

She handed him the wine-glass with a weary shake of her head.

"You 're disgusted with me, Jack. So am I with myself. Give me that clam stuff. What a weakling I am!"

Lowe sat down opposite her, balancing the flower-like wine-glass in his heavy hand with a touch as light as a surgeon's. A French dictum ran through his head which he forebore to quote: "Cæsar was never so powerful as when he lay a corpse!" He had seen Clem Merrit in many a situation, and had found her interesting in them all, and mistress of them all, until this lamentable thing was forced upon her; and now, broken as he had never

CLEM

imagined her, she had never appealed to him so strongly.

"I must have been faint for want of food," Clem said at last, after she had drained the cup. "No, nothing more, please. But I did n't—have much luncheon to-day, and this news coming on top of everything—Jack, it seems a thousand years since I woke this morning!"

She leaned toward him, her elbow resting on the chair arm, and her face sunk in her palm. Her voice was growing steadier under the influence of the stimulants Lowe had urged upon her.

"You don't believe it was suicide, do you?" she asked him simply.

"Good God, *no!*" Lowe replied irritably. "He's too sane a brute. It's all rot, every one knows it. Listen to me: there's not a soul down there who really thinks that, but his mother, and she's half mad, poor soul! Of course, it's hanging in the atmosphere, because of her fixed belief and the whole cursed set of circumstances. But she's alone in her delusion. The rest of us—"

CLEM

Clem looked at him with a faintly bitter smile. "The rest of you!" she breathed. "Oh, these surmisings and gossipings—they drive one mad!"

"Well, now," drawled Lowe soothingly, "you must grant, out of your just heart, that appearances have been provocative of conjecture and surmise. But you could n't ever marry that young cub, Clem."

"No," she assented. "I could n't ever marry him."

There was something in her voice which made Lowe bend toward her in the half-dim light. He had been in no one's confidence, and yet he knew, as did all of them at The Pines, the main outlines of the little comedy which had resolved itself into such bitter tragedy. Until now he had hardly been able to believe that the infatuation had been anything but one-sided. All who loitered might read Reggie's charming story, but, knowing Clem Meritt as he knew her, he had not believed that the affair had ever been as serious a thing on either side as Mrs. Wines had made of

CLEM

it. A swift sentence leaped to his lips, born of his whispered speech with Reggie two hours before—it was said before he knew it, and he pondered over that strange prompting to garrulity for many hours in the days succeeding.

“The boy is mad about you; he may bring you face to face with the question of immediate marriage—forgive me! He said as much.”

“Before his mother?”

Lowe nodded, mute.

Clem turned her face away until he could see only its pure, fine outline in the shadow.

“Tell her—when she speaks to you about that—and she will—that I ’ll let him die, hers, before I ’ll save him that way.” Her voice quivered with fine vibrations.

Lowe sat back, in silence, conscious that he was treading on dangerously delicate ground. He knew but little of the particulars of this story, but he knew that in it the boy had played the minor part, that

CLEM

the two women had all the lines and all the business; and it bore all the earmarks of a woman's handling, of that he was quite cynically aware.

She turned to him at last, with her pallid face tremulous with feeling. "Don't talk us over with any of them, Jack," she said. "Let me feel that there 's one person in that house who is n't playing the waiting cat. Since he 's said so much to you—I *was* engaged to Reggie Wines three weeks ago. His mother asked me down yonder, and I went! And I broke the engagement this afternoon, and I told her so before I left. And now, in three hours' time, I 'll be back there, facing her again, across Reggie—"

"The only gossiping I 've done of you and Reggie has been done just now," said Lowe with a slight smile. "And, since you and I have disposed of the subject, I can heartily assure you it will be the last. I am the farthest remove possible from a waiting cat. Let me rather, to your mind, play the part of the faithful Fido, Clem,

CLEM

—and, in addition, your very sincere friend!”

He glanced out of the window at the dark, fleeing landscape, and reached down for Clem's hand-bag. The girl's face paled, and her heart began to beat with slow, dull throbbings as the train slowed down to let off this group at a station where otherwise it would not have paused. Before their car had ceased its grinding tremors, Lowe hurried her down its steps, after the nurses and surgeons, and then bore her with a quick rush across the station platform toward the touring-car, Reggie's favorite, which pulsed in waiting for them. The fact that their traveling companions were already there, waiting for her, brought home to her more vividly than the great leaps forward of the car, as it started on its journey for the saving of life, the fact that moments did mean life and death, and that it was really Reggie who was lying all but mortally hurt a brief three miles ahead of them.

There was no attempt at introduction,

CLEM

and Clem sank back, with veiled face, an object of furtive interest to the five strangers who glanced at her many times during the three miles' run. The woman in any case is always interesting, and they guessed enough of the story to make them sure that this beautiful girl was quite as necessary as the nurses to the young man's recovery.

They came to a swinging stop at last before the dusky house. Every night before, the lights had blazed from every window. To-night the lower part of the house was only dimly lighted. Across the upper windows shadowy figures moved from time to time, hurrying, and eager. A single, solitary figure awaited them at the entrance.

Clem was sitting nearest the steps when the car stopped, and it was Lorimer who helped her out. She shrank from him visibly as he touched her. He still held her hands as he turned to Lowe and spoke rapidly:

"They have already arranged the billiard-room, under Housman's directions, for the operating-room. Will you take

CLEM

them up there, Jack? Dell will see to anything you want. His mother has been kept from him as much as possible, because of her own condition."

He waited until the ominous group disappeared within the entrance door, and then he turned back to Clem. She had definitely drawn her hands away from him; he still felt their coldness lingering, like a chill, upon his own.

"I don't know how to tell you, and I must tell you," he began incoherently, his face somewhat drawn with the strain of the day's events. "You will blame me forever if I don't. Mrs. Wines—"

Clem moved away from him. With his words, the very sound of his voice, her poise came back, and her quivering nerves grew still.

"Don't tell it," she said deliberately. "Mr. Lowe has prepared me."

"On its face it is unpardonable," Lorimer stammered. "But if you could only realize the frenzy of her grief and her despair—she is hardly sane—"

CLEM

"I can make more excuses for her than you can," Clem interrupted. "I 'm nothing, now, but an inexperienced nurse, here for no reason but because I 've been sent for."

"I have tried to make her see you—to make her spare you—" Lorimer continued with an impetuous defense, blundering as he had never blundered in all his faultless life before. He swore at himself, under his breath, for his crassness.

Clem moved further yet away from him, until she was leaning against a pillar, the same pillar against which she had crouched not twenty-four hours before, under the eyes of this self-same man. Her blue eyes looked brightly on him.

"Don't try to spare me—ever again," she said distinctly. "I 'm not grateful. No, thanks. I 've not been sent for yet. Until the doctors want me, there 's no reason why I should go inside."

Her eyes were blazing and her lip curled again. Every instinct to haughty pride was alive within her. Her veins

CLEM

were running warm blood now, and with every moment she seemed to grow more dangerously alive. Lorimer looked on her in vain search for the studied calm she had manifested before, for that reasonable good sense which had marked almost every previous act and speech of hers. He was still writhing under the calculated lashes she had dealt him three hours back; and he writhed vicariously for his class when he saw the contempt which leaped to her eyes as she learned that her hostess refused to yield to what savages would make courteous necessity. He appreciated keenly her refusal to enter the house until she was summoned for the one purpose for which she had come.

He walked away a few steps, and then he came quickly back to her. His face was whiter, and his eyes were gleaming with a rather dangerous light.

"We have passed through a trying ordeal, all of us," he said with a touch of bitterness. "Grant me that much. All of it has been a mistake, and of the mistake no

CLEM

one is more keenly aware than the ones who are to blame for it—”

She laughed grimly. “You ’re too generous!” she said. “It was a woman’s trick. No man could have planned that sort of thing, and carried it out to the end. I never accused you of that.”

“Then don’t accuse me of trying to spare you—anything!” he retorted. “I think that I must have put it very badly. I was beseeching your pity for that boy’s mother. Spare her, of your mercy!”

Clem’s head went up swiftly, but in that moment Lowe came quickly through the doors, and up to her.

“He wants to see you, Clem,” he said. “The surgeons will be ready in ten minutes, and that time is to be his and yours. Drake, keep his mother away by any means. Dell says she ’s unnerved, and the boy could think of nothing but death if she came to him now, on the eve of the operation. Tell her he ’s unconscious. Tell her anything you think of. Now, Clem!”

Clem unpinned her hat, and cast it and

CLEM

her summer coat on a chair beside her. In her simple linen dress, she looked as if she might have just returned from a twilight stroll. With her head wonderfully poised, she followed Lowe's heavy figure and cat-like tread up the shadowy stairs. And after them Lorimer followed, doggedly. He watched with somber eyes Clem's dull blue skirts trail softly through the upper hall as she walked with Lowe toward the door of Reggie's room. Before that closed door she paused a moment, and laid her hand heavily on Lowe's arm. He bent toward her, whispering a few words of cheer, and she nodded silently. Then the boy's door opened, and Dell came out. She uttered a smothered little cry, and caught Clem in a close embrace; then she pushed the girl gently into the room, and shut the door upon her.

XIV

CLEM went swiftly across the room, toward the wide-eyed boy lying on his bed, waiting for her. As she saw the white face, her heart gave one slow, painful throb, and Reggie, watching her hungrily, caught sight of the pain reflected in her eyes, and knew the cause thereof.

"It does n't hurt— so beastly—bad!" he whispered reassuringly, as he put up one strengthless hand to her face, and tried to draw it down to his. "It 's—no fun; but they 've given me some stuff that 's going to my head already—I did n't want that, not till after you 'd come, but they fired it into me, because I 'm down. Clem, it was all my fault—I 've been a fool—"

She raised her head from where it lay against his cheek, and her arms tightened about him in a spasm of fear. Her doubts

CLEM

all but found utterance. But she caught the moan back heroically.

"What about, dear?" she whispered, her lips white with dread.

"You—this—everything! Clem, you did n't mean it—what you said out yonder, under the pines, a thousand years ago—Ever since they dragged me here and laid me down, I 've known you could n't have meant it. I was crazy, furious, maddened—up to the time the shot went home—then, somehow, things cleared—I saw then you could n't have meant it—it was so beautiful—it had to last—but you laughed once, under that ghastly tree, a thousand years ago—and the sound of your laugh filled me with madness—you did n't mean it?"

"No, no!" Clem whispered. "I did n't mean it! Not that way, Reggie."

"So I came back here—just in time to see you going away—and I came up here, and got out my guns and things—to make my choice—I was a fool, Clem—I ought to have faced you down and put—if I ever

CLEM

get up from this, I know I can. Or if I 'd ever been in love with a girl before—you 're such a crazy lot, all of you!—but I picked up that automatic pistol—there was a trick about the trigger I did n't understand, and when the thing blew up, it landed in a bad place, darling."

"Reggie, Reggie!" the girl whispered. She raised her head and looked into his eyes. He had sunk back, deep into his pillows, his face contracted with a slight spasm of pain.

"Reggie!" she murmured again, desperately. "You did n't—" then she drew back, still staring into the boy's fast dimming eyes; whether she was wise or exceeding unwise she did not know. "Do you know what all of them out yonder think, Reggie—that you did it on purpose—"

The boy frowned. "No, they don't," he said shortly. "When I found I was n't dead, I told 'em over and over that it was an accident. They can't think anything else—I told Jack to tell you that. But I

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wanted to see you alone, to tell you the truth—what a damn fool I 've been, darling, and to make you—marry me now, Clem. They 're going to operate, they say—is it—very serious?”

His voice was thick now, and his muttered words were hardly coherent. “Is it very serious?” he repeated. Again her arms tightened about him.

“It must n't be, dear,” she murmured. “You 're so big and strong and well—”

He interrupted fretfully. “I wish I could stand things without ether. I hate dope. I like to know what 's happening—Anyway I want more time, and a clear head, since we 've got things straightened out between us—before they dump me in yonder, and begin to work—that 's just why I did n't want 'em to give me that first dose—”

His voice trailed off into incoherency. Clem glanced up from her agonized gazing, as a bright shaft of light fell across the foot of the bed through an open door. The white-clad figure of one of the sur-

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geons stood in the doorway, and through it one of the nurses, white-clad too, came quickly, bearing the merciful ether cone. Clem bent over the boy and kissed him passionately.

"Shut your eyes, dear," she whispered unsteadily, "for a quiet nap, and when you wake up, everything is going to be all right."

DURING the hour through which the operation endured, Clem waited in the upper hall, with Lowe and Lorimer and Gresham. Dell and Virginia were with the mother, whose convulsive moans pierced the tense stillness of the house at irregular and nerve-racking intervals.

Through it all Clem sat silent, hardly moving, save to shield her face at times with her hand. Those were invariably the moments when Lowe, watching her unobtrusively, came over to her, rescuing her from herself with some message from the operating-room, or some word of cheer. Most of the time, however, she sat with her

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head thrown back against her chair, sick and faint with suspense. Once, when her eyes had been closed for a space of time whose measuring she did not know, she was roused by a touch on her arm, and looked up dizzily to find Lorimer standing over her with a glass of wine in his hand. She took it gratefully, for she was all but swooning, as she very well knew, but she found no word of thanks for his thought of her. After that she did not dare close her eyes for fear of slipping into unconsciousness—this hour of inaction and imaginings was sapping her strength. She kept her hold of consciousness by watching, with wide, bright eyes, Lorimer's restless tramping up and down the length of the hall, whose monotony he broke with many purposeless exits on to the broad, second-story veranda which lay along the eastern side of the house; by keeping conscientious record of Lowe's rapidly smoked cigarettes; by making careful note of Gresham's ungraceful contortions. The faint, sickish odor of anesthetics, and the

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pungent smell of antiseptics crept into the hall, and stirred her vivid brain to keener, more unendurable imaginings.

But the long hours dragged themselves out at last, and Clem was called again to Reggie's room. She went, feeling like a guilty thing. If only he would ask for his mother, for Dell, Virginia, for any other woman in the house! Yet, when she entered the room, and saw his white face, and heard his murmured call for her, she lost sight of everything but him and his welfare. Reggie's recovery—and he had his chance, even though the chances against him were great—was all that mattered to her from that moment. Every shred of self-consciousness fell away from her in that moment, and she felt herself revived with a rush of self-confidence which was old and yet new. Reggie had need of her in his sore stress. Whatever circumstances had led to this state of affairs, she had her vital place in this circle of people at last. And as she realized, instantaneously with the boy's muttered call for her, how in-

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dispensable she was, all thought of the others fell away, and she gave herself, with a wonderfully vital concentration, to one solemn purpose—the saving of this boy's life. Nothing else mattered; and when she bent over him, in all her glorious strength of mind and body, she seemed, even to the weary little group of surgeons and nurses, nothing less than a giver of life.

XV

AND she seemed nothing less than that to Lorimer, when they met, face to face, early the next morning, in the shadowy upper hall. She had just closed Reggie's door behind her as Lorimer came down from the floor above.

"How is he, after the night?" he asked.

"Asleep now. He's been restless, up to dawn. The doctors don't say much."

She stood before him, in her white linen dress, superbly strong, superbly alive. The very sight of her this morning made his blood pulse faster. From her night of watching there lingered a slight pallor which only heightened the new charm which enveloped her.

Her brows met in a slight frown, under his intense gaze, and Lorimer, catching himself up instantly, broke the too oppressive silence.

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"There is nothing at all I can do for you? Could you be spared now for a short drive or ride? It is n't possible that you have been up all night!"

"I 've just had a few hours of rest," she said, with a slow shake of her head. "I 'm even going to have my breakfast sent up here. They want me within call all the time to-day. Whenever Reggie rouses, he wants me, you see," she added simply.

She moved away from him, had turned quite aside in fact, but she came back, and addressed him brusquely:

"Look here! You can tell Mrs. Wines better than anybody; she 'll stand it from you. Twice last night she stood at this door, staring into the room, with those wild, fierce eyes—it gave me the shivers. Of course Reggie's pretty bad, and she may blame me a lot; but you tell her this: what I said to her yesterday afternoon, *stands!* I 'd not marry him—not to save his life—because she 'd rather see him dead—she would n't thank me. I 've *got* to be in there with him—it 's doctors' or-

CLEM

ders—God knows I wish she could be there instead. But he wants *me*, and only me, and so he shall have me, all my days and nights, till I can give him back to her—well! I 'm no Indian-giver. All this—” she swept her hands out in a wonderful gesture—“has been like a scratch across a picture. I 've told him all sorts of things, all last night; but none of it stands except what I told *her*. You tell her that. Tell her not to get scared. I don't want a thing she 's set her heart on.”

Her voice was perfectly level, and a person with an untrained ear would have said it was emotionless. Lorimer knew voices better, and knew her better, and he put out his hand toward hers on an impulse of an admiration unbounded.

“You are wonderful, *wonderful!*” he said.

At her quick start he let her hand fall. A faint, fretful cry drifted to them through the closed door. It was Reggie, calling her name.

For a moment he stood in the doorway,

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watching her as she went quickly across the room and bent over the boy, who was still murmuring her name with impatient tenderness. He saw her drop lightly to the floor and slip her arm under the tossing brown head. He saw her lips brush his cheek lightly, and her own cheek laid against the boy's. And then he closed the door decisively, and went across the broad corridor to the long doors which opened on that upper veranda where he sat through most of the night before. It was very early, hardly six o'clock, and the weary household was still sleeping.

He sat down in the chair which he had occupied for so great a part of the night before, with a keen memory of those leaden-winged hours. Here he and Gresham and Lowe had sat, ready for anything, but so patently useless. To them Dell had flitted from time to time, with bits of news, or messages. Reggie was recovering well from the anesthetic; Mrs. Wines was under the influence of an opiate; Virginia had yielded to entreaty, and had gone to

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her room; Clem was still needed; every time she stirred to go away the boy roused and asked for her. And to them all, to Dell sitting curled up beside Gresham in a huge chair, and to Lowe and himself, had come, just before the dawn, Clem Merrit, with her hair and dress in disarray and her face white and weary.

"I came to tell you all that I am sent away for the rest of the night," she had said directly, "because I 'm not needed any more for a while; and that everything is as hopeful as it can possibly be now. If Mrs. Wines is awake—oh, I 'm glad. But if she had been waiting for word she ought to have even this little bit of good news."

And then Dell had whirled herself to her feet, and with characteristic rapidity had taken charge of the girl. And here he sat again, after four brief hours of rest, reliving it all.

For Drake Lorimer, since Clem Merrit's parting words to him the day before, had not had any consecutive moments in

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which to consider all they held for him, and all that they might mean to him. He had been writhing under them for a thousand years, it seemed to him, so swiftly had event followed on event in these last twelve hours. One sentence of hers had rung in his ears, ever since she had uttered it: "No one side of life can afford to sit back in a smug little corner and say, 'I 'm It!' "

She had accused them all of being snobs. As she had granted, it was not a pretty word. But she had uttered it firmly, though not until he himself had put it into speech. And after uttering it, she had explained it, definitely; and Lorimer resented, with an appreciation both of its justness and unjustness, her classification of him.

But he resented far more deeply his classification of her. He had taken her at a merely surface value, and even in that surface valuation of her he had been unfair. He had labeled her *nouveau riche*, with all that it implies of vulgarity and lack of

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breeding. And yesterday, in her departure from the place where she had been put to the torture, she had shown a justness of judgment which had shamed him utterly. She had refused to blame the mother for the cruel trick practised on her, because she remembered, resolutely, that mother's son. She had granted them all their point of view, and in her sane, personal judgment of them, had taken that view-point into consideration. By so much had she shown a fineness which they, in their judgment of her and her motives, had lacked. And if she had shown them justice when she left them, she had shown them the uttermost mercy in the manner of her return. He could never forget that moment when she refused to enter the house until she had her orders from those in authority, the boy's physicians. She had refused even then to blame Mrs. Wines; had ignored all her frenzies of grief; but she had retained her own standards.

And all this meant that she had reached

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to heights where they had not ascended; and that they had sunk to depths on whose brink she stood aloof.

For one undisturbed hour he gripped with searching self-questioning. He had felt assured for many years that he had a philosopher's natural view of life and men and women. Not for all of ten years, until this last month, has he met any one, man or woman, who had unsettled his cool, tempered judgment, whose personality had not lent itself to general rules and classifications. But this girl had been a disquieting force in his life, ever since he had seen her. She had uprooted, ruthlessly, his philosophy, had shaken his conventions, his beliefs, most of what he had termed his knowledge of men and women and life. And he knew that he could compass no peace of mind or spirit until in some way he had made atonement for his crass judgment of her.

He looked up to see Mrs. Wines coming toward him, her hands held out in piteous appeal.

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“Will the doctors say anything to *you?*” she asked him. “I went into his room last night—twice! And this morning—I have just come from him, from the door where they let me stand, out of his sight, but in hearing of his voice that is calling always for ‘Clem!’ ‘Clem!’ ‘Clem!’ They tried to make me stay in my room, within sound of that unending cry of his—”

Of them all, life was hardest, that day, for Frances Wines, and Lorimer realized it. He understood that she, too, had looked upon the picture he had seen; had watched Clem Merrit on her knees beside the bed, with her strong young arms about the boy, with her cheek laid against his, soothing him, necessary to him, as she, his mother, was not.

Lorimer went to meet her, and put her into a low, comfortable chair. “You won’t forget that the slightest touch of fever always sets Reggie off,” he reminded her. “He has raved through all his illnesses. We have everything to help us, the surgeons we most desired, and nurses, and

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Clem Merrit. And from her lips, given to me an hour ago, I have a message for you—I want you to listen to it now.”

He said it over slowly, almost word for word: “—he shall have me, all my days and nights, until I give him back to her—well!” “—I’m no Indian-giver—” “—it’s like a scratch across a picture—” All her phrasings and intonations came back to him as he repeated her words to Frances Wines.

She listened in silence, her mind distraught with her grief. Only one thought filled her brain; the conviction that her son was lying, all but self-slain, because of this girl. Lorimer knew her thought, and his face grew sterner.

“I have kept the morbid promise you demanded,” he said. “I have not suggested the idea of suicide to the surgeons. But neither have they suggested it to me. I will swear that it is nothing but an unfortunate accident. But however that may be—”

He came closer to her, and spoke with

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added emphasis: "It is worse than barbarous for her to continue with us under present conditions. She will stay—oh, yes! But each moment that she stays—so—only serves to raise her, and to lower us, infinitely. She did us an infinite favor in coming back—she could do no less, you say. Most certainly she could do no more, after the manner of her leaving. And every moment that she stays here, a pariah in your eyes, we are proving ourselves less and less her peers. And I, for one, writhe under it."

Lorimer was speaking with such earnestness that he did not notice Dell's approach. As he finished, she spoke quickly.

"And I, too, dear Aunt Frances. I am Clem Merrit's very good friend. We sealed terms and conditions last night, and I spoke to her very frankly of this wretched business. We *must* play up to her. She is no more the same girl who swept into your dining-room that first night she came here, in her pale-gold dress and all her crudities, than we are the same people

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we were before we met her. Something volcanic has happened to all of us. Every man here is her friend—ah!”

She broke off with a cry of disgust at her own stupidity, as she saw the look which crossed Mrs. Wines’s face.

“Oh, every man, my dear Dell!” she murmured. Then she broke into rapid speech. “It is n’t that I don’t concede the girl her good points—she has them—but she alone is to blame for this awful thing. It is good of her to come back—yes!—but she could do no less. And being back—oh, my boy, my boy!”

Dell looked upon the white face helplessly. With a dimness of insight with which she did not have often to struggle, she wondered if this was, after all, motherhood; this blind intensity, this bending of all things else to the ultimate good of the best beloved. Dell’s own child had died in its infancy, six years before, and she had never had another. She was hardly made for motherhood, for many of its potent instincts were lacking in her, but a

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stifled longing after her brief maternity stirred painfully within her at times. It stirred now; it made her pitiful toward the great resentment which lay in this mother's eyes; but her heart throbbed too, for the victim of this mother's devotion to her son; and, finally, because there was nothing left for her or Lorimer to do or say, they went away together.

All day long Mrs. Wines wrestled with herself; she held Clem Merrit's message in her hands, and she looked upon it steadily, from every standpoint. "—I 'd not marry him to save his life—because she 'd rather see him dead—she would n't thank me!" It sounded brutal. But it did not sound more brutal than it was.

And when the day dragged into evening; when the boy's fever mounted higher, and Lorimer, with troubled face, held her back from Reggie's doorway, asking her to wait, because the delirium was violent and she could do nothing, she seemed to know by instinct what he was saving her from hearing. A few words floated out to her,

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enough to confirm her instant, intuitive knowledge; her boy was raving against her, against her injustice, her cruelty. "He blames you—some," Clem Merrit had dared to tell her. Yes, he blamed her.

It took her solemn watch that night, from midnight to dawn, to break utterly the stiff-necked, bitter anger which had held her for so many hours; that solemn watch which she kept, alone, upon the room where her boy lay, with his nurses and with Clem. From the darkened hall, where she sat unseen, she looked steadfastly upon the girl's face, as it bent above the boy's. It was sleep that he needed, and that he would not take unless Clem's arm lay beneath his head. So often, at first, the girl seemed to think he was sleeping soundly, only to see him rouse into irritable consciousness at the first motion of her withdrawing arm; and at last, for two long hours before the dawn, Clem knelt beside him, motionless, racked with a weary pain to which she would not succumb.

It was just dawn when the nurses lifted

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her to her feet, from the spot where she had knelt for two hours. One of the first bad breaks in the boy's case was spanned, and in the reaction her strength slipped momentarily away. She could not walk at first, and her very life seemed ebbing out of her when she finally stepped into the hall with one of the nurses, bound for, what seemed to her an impossible goal, her own room, across the corridor.

She seemed to be walking in a painful dream; it was a dream that Reggie's mother came up to her, touched her, spoke to her; spoke to the nurse in a frightened voice about her. The dream still enveloped her as she lay upon her bed, her cramped muscles helpless to aid her, and felt Mrs. Wines's hands no less tender, and almost as skilful as the nurse's, loosen her clothes and make her comfortable. It was a dream of dreams when she felt Mrs. Wines push away the sleeve from the weary arm where Reggie's head had rested for so long, and begin to rub back into life the numbed muscles. Clem flung up her other arm

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over her face, and hid it so, for many minutes. It was all a dream—she had no desire to wake. She heard the nurse say something in a low voice; heard Mrs. Wines's assent; heard the sound of a closing door. The nurse had left them. And still those cool, magnetic hands caressed her—

She thrilled into life at last, when she felt hot tears falling on her arm, and she turned her head and stared into Mrs. Wines's face. As their eyes met Clem put up a protesting hand, but Mrs. Wines laid her own upon it.

"You stopped me two days ago," she murmured, "—in what I would have said to you. It is all something almost too bitter for words; and yet you were brave enough to speak, and to speak most justly and gently to me; and everything you said was quite true, and took more courage in the saying than I had—or have. Drake gave me your message this morning—I am bitterly ashamed I seemed so in need of it—I have blamed you bitterly for too many things—and if he lives—"

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Her voice broke utterly.

Clem turned her face until it lay against Mrs. Wines's. "If he lives," she whispered, "he 'll be yours. Can't you see the thing between us is dead, dead! It can't be helped; it 's over and done with forever."

She felt Mrs. Wines's fleeting kiss on her forehead, and she caught the older woman's hand, and held it fast.

"I could n't bear to have you say this sort of thing to me, ever again," she whispered; "but I 'll never forget your coming here to-night—never!"

And then she sank into a dead, dreamless sleep.

XVI

ALL through the anxious week that followed, Mrs. Wines never lost her wonder at Clem Merrit's resolute matter-of-factness; at her cool acceptance of sick-room conditions. It seemed ever new and strange to her that Clem should bend so instantly over Reggie when he called her; should kiss his lips and forehead; should press her cool cheek to his; all with no more self-consciousness than when she gave him the medicine or food which he would take from no one else. And meantime he passed from crisis to crisis, until there came at last a night when the gods of life and death fought visibly above his bed for possession of him, in full panoply of war, before the pale, wan mother, and the determined girl who refused to look beyond any present moment of struggle. And in the end, life was victor, though by

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so small a margin that they dared not hope too much until day after day of steady gaining rolled around to make them sure.

Then it was that the mother's hard hours came again. In his convalescence, slow and wavering, her boy was not hers. He liked to have her near him, when Clem was away; and after those long days and nights of constant care, it was needful that she should be out of the sick-room for many hours, gaining the rest which she sorely needed. During these hours Reggie lay patiently enough, with his mother in attendance, but he talked of Clem incessantly.

"You like her now, mother!" he would say; and at her assent he would smile proudly. "I always told you she was the finest sort of a girl," he would assert. "Think of a girl like her sticking by a fellow for days and nights, when the house was full of doctors and nurses—just because he yelled for her—she 's the finest sort of a girl!"

It was all boyish and very simple, and so dear. She loved him all the more for his

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loyalty, and she found herself suffering vicariously for him in that moment when he must learn that all the sweet assurances which Clem had murmured to him in those hours of his illness were mere murmurings. For herself, she could not doubt Clem Merrit's firm resolve; yet she caught herself rebelling at it once or twice, while she watched her boy lying dreamily, with an odd, tender little smile curving his clean young mouth. Was the girl to go happily on her way, leaving Reggie behind her, suffering and forlorn! It was monstrous! When it meant suffering for them both, it was easier for the mother to contemplate it. Now, when it seemed that only her boy was to wince beneath the bludgeoning of fate, the situation took on a different aspect.

She did not do Clem Merrit full justice yet; doubt there was if she ever could, so dissimilar were their planes of thought and action. Yet she was forced to this conclusion at last: Clem did her fuller justice than she did Clem; Clem judged motives more gently, and truly sympathized with

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limitations to a more vital degree. And Frances Wines was forced to this better knowledge of the girl, past all her gentle laws of caste and race, and past all her grave reserve.

Clem Merrit's own straightforwardness helped the situation as nothing else did or could. In her own phrase, she had buried the hatchet deep in the uncomfortable past. After all, there were only two people here against whom she had felt heavy resentment, and both of these people had done all things to atone. Mrs. Wines's tears had done more than any words; and Drake Lorimer had left nothing undone which an ever-present thoughtfulness could prompt. But with all he had done, he had left much unsaid. This, with some sixth sense, Clem knew; and she was warding off any further reparation on his part. She had had enough of it. She was willing to forget.

Therefore she accepted Lorimer as she accepted Lowe, and Lowe as she accepted

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Lorimer, on an easy basis of frank good-fellowship. Both of them were resourceful in their plans for her comfort and recreation, and more often than not it was with both of them that she departed on her rides and her walks. She swept all the cobwebs of finesse and restraint away from her path, by her resolute ignoring of what had gone before, and matters settled into a state of freedom and comfort as delightful as it was surprising.

And she had no more reason to say she had no woman friend. For Dell Gresham was outspokenly that—Clem Merrit's friend. Lowe watched the growth of that friendship with humorous interest, feeling a certain proprietary pride in it. He had divined the kinship in their natures long since, and every man is proud of proof that he is intuitive.

As for his pride in his own conception of Clem Merrit, it waxed with each day. She had not failed herself. She had faced as hard a situation as life would probably

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hold for her ; and she had faced it gallantly, with her head held high, and with lips that smiled without bravado, but with a very fine courage. She had won against the heaviest of odds, by sheer force of that splendid spirit which glowed within her. Throughout this most bitter test, she had not been found wanting, in the most essential sense. She had rather shown unsuspected strength along lines where one might look for the least resistance. As matters had developed, hers was the advantage ; theirs, the damage. All along the line they had been routed, and, one by one, they were coming back, to sit in her tent's shadow, a Hudibrastic *dénouement* of which she was splendidly unconscious.

Now and then Lowe permitted himself a mild wonder as to the still hidden truth of Reggie's shooting fray. Since the evening on which he went into town to meet Clem and bring her back, no words relating to it had passed her lips. It was a subject tabooed between them, and Lowe did not know whether the girl's lips were sealed

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from uncertainty or distressing knowledge. In a happier contingency he felt sure that he would have been told. He did not foresee in just what way things hidden were to be revealed, nor the far-reaching effects of that revealing.

XVII

THE revelation came, six weeks to a day from the time of Reggie's mishap, on a morning when Clem was absent, riding hard with Lorimer along the country roads. It involved the entire household, which accounted for the noticeable tensity of the luncheon hour; a tensity which Clem and Lorimer, entering the dining-room almost at the close of the meal, missed. They were in their riding clothes, and they offered but scant apology therefor.

"We 're famished," Clem said to Dell, as she dropped into a vacant chair beside her. "I 'm keeping my hat on. My hair would drop to my knees if I did n't." She flung her whip into a corner and drew off her gloves. Then she glanced about the table.

"Where 's Reggie?" she demanded.

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"Did n't he feel up to coming down?" For Reggie had been spending most of the last few days down-stairs.

"Oh, he is perfectly well," Mrs. Wines answered her hastily. "He—"

Lowe filled in the pause promptly, before the wonder in Clem's eyes grew too great.

"He is sulking, Clem," he remarked confidentially, at her elbow. "He desires to see you immediately."

"What rot!" Clem said. "What 's up, Jack?"

She was glancing carefully about the table, and she felt a definite change. If Jack's aside was true, Reggie's sulking was making his relatives undeniably happy. Mrs. Wines, especially, looked the embodiment of peace and joy. She made a somewhat hasty meal, and rose abruptly, while the others were still sitting casually about.

"This riding habit is too stuffy to endure," she said. "Do let me go!"

As she passed Mrs. Wines, that lady reached out a detaining hand. "Reggie has

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been asking for you, Clem," she said. There was a note of eager joy in her voice which puzzled the girl.

"Yes," she said. "I 'll go to him in a little while."

She stopped at Reggie's door, before she went to her own room, and tapped lightly on it with her whip handle. "I 'm back, Reggie," she called. "As soon as I get out of these riding things I 'll come in."

"Never mind about the riding togs," said Reggie crossly. "Come in now, Clem. I want to talk to you about something important. Can you fix up a deal to keep the whole lot of rotters down-stairs from running in and out? I want to talk to you alone. It 's important, I tell you."

He was wagging his head ominously, and his frown was fierce. Clem stared at him in wonder and some amusement, and then she came farther into the room, and closed the door behind her.

"It just occurs to me that they 're all prepared down-stairs, for this little wig-wag of ours," she remarked coolly. "I don't think

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we 'll take any big chances if we settle down right now."

She came freely across the room, her whip still swinging lightly in her hand, and she stood for a moment beside his chair, in her severe habit, with her small Derby still banded tight to her head. As he did not speak at once, she dropped into a chair opposite him, cutting at the intervening air lightly with her whip.

"It was a gorgeous morning!" she said at length. "Mr. Lorimer and I were out till luncheon. I wonder when those beasts of doctors are going to let you ride again!"

"That 's what I want to talk to you about, Clem," Reggie interposed. "Have you got any idea of what people are saying about this condemned shooting fray of mine? Do you know what people here think?"

"Nobody 's told me what anybody thinks," Clem replied cheerfully. "I 've been too busy to listen, if any one had."

"That 's what I told 'em," Reggie affirmed. "Mother got in here before I got

CLEM

through with Vee—Vee gave it all away—and they both made a great powwow. Vee let out too much, without meaning to, and I jumped on her, and jerked the rest out before she knew it. She 's been thinking, and mother 's been thinking, all along, and all the rest of 'em, for that matter, Dell and Eaton and Drake—that it was a blunder at suicide!—that I tried to do for myself with a confounded bullet!—that I 'm alive to-day only because I did n't know how to shoot to kill! Vee owned up that mother was certain of it, and that Drake and Eaton were afraid of it—and as many more who knew you 'd tried to throw me down; owned up that everybody in this shack, down to the stable boy, thinks I 'm a near-suicide, a poor, driveling, sniveling fool! That I tried to shoot myself because a girl had thrown me over! Well, it hurt that day, but not that way—”

He raised his eyes to Clem's all too expressive face, and met her betraying eyes full; and he bent toward her with a dark flush flooding his face.

CLEM

"You too!" he said sharply. "*Et tu, Brute!*" did not come in its first utterance from a heart more deeply charged with woe.

It was Clem's turn to flush slightly, and to rush to hurried words.

"Truly, Reggie, no! Not even when Jack told me your mother thought it, the night he came after me, and brought me back. Not till I saw you, before the operation, and you yourself said things that made me sure—for a while, that is—that it was a plain case of—"

Reggie checked her with a hand upraised in awful dignity.

"Did it enter your head, *once*, before you saw me all dopey and queer in the head, as a possible thing?" he asked.

Clem flecked delicately at her riding boot and did not reply.

"It did!" Reggie groaned, and fell back into his chair, with his eyes closed against the alluring sight of her as she sat there in her riding dress, with her whip flecking the air.

CLEM

“Now look here, Reggie,” Clem said at last, with that business-like directness which distinguished her and all her deeds. “Just figure it out a bit, will you. I told you that afternoon that I would n’t marry you—and I want you to get accustomed, by the way, to the thought that that statement still stands. You ’ve been desperately sick, and you had to be told all sorts of creamy nonsense, as nonsensical as what you said before the operation evidently was. Just get used to that, will you? So off you go in a huff—perhaps you don’t remember what you said as you cut out behind those pine-trees, but I do very well, and did, that same evening, when Jack met me with the pleasant news that you were shot. You had said that you were going to the devil—well, I thought, if you ’ll pardon me, that you ’d started. And then I remembered what a cracking shot you are, and when Jack said a second time that it was the sort of wound it was, I was sure the other idea was absurd, and that it was only an accident, doubly unfortunate

CLEM

because it happened to come at such a very uncomfortable time for all of us. So I come back here, because you said you wanted me, and I 'm sent in here before they operate, and you begin a lot of burble about being a fool, and thoughts of murder when I laughed—and, in short, I was pretty thoroughly scared! Men *have* done it, you know," she added defensively, as she caught Reggie's look of dire contempt.

"Fools have!" muttered Reggie.

"Well, fools, if you like. They 're lots of 'em loose in every woods. Of course you said it was an accident, but you 'd be likely to say that; anybody would, as soon as he found he could still talk, whether he was telling the truth or not. So that did n't count for or against you. And the doctors did n't count, in their diagnoses, for or against, and when they did n't say it was self-inflicted, or hint at it, why, nobody took it on himself to start the story."

Reggie sat in wrathful dignity, and Clem watched him quizzically. She had disappointed him sorely, that was evident;

CLEM

and she was a bit sorry, but it *was* funny —his fuming impotency. She wondered dumbly how much longer she could preserve a fitting gravity in the face of it.

“That ’s it,” the boy said at last. “All the talk! About you and me! It ’s not decent sort of talk for you, and it makes me out a driveling fool, the sort of fool any right-minded girl ought to want to shoot, herself! The idea of a man’s shooting himself for a girl!”

Clem broke into ringing laughter. “What ’s the proper thing, Reggie?” she asked, unwisely.

“You wait and see!” the boy retorted with wrath.

Clem looked deeply on him; then she rose from her chair, and went over to him, and dropped on her knees beside him.

“Listen to me, Reggie!” she said. “There ’s no waiting about it, for either of us; because the thing ’s done for, ended! Don’t you see? It was beautiful while it lasted, and no girl would ever want a dearer lover, but it was midsummer mad-

CLEM

ness, and the summer 's all but gone. It was all my fault—I ought to have known better—I did know better; but you loved me in a way that no man 's ever loved me—you can't understand, and I can't tell you any more about it; but I loved you dearly for that sort of love you gave me. But that sort of love you felt for me could n't last—it never lasts; and unless there 's something else to fall back on, better and more solid, it goes like a bubble—like this love of ours has gone. Ah, yes, it has gone, Reggie! You need n't own it to me now, but it 's gone from us.”

She looked mournfully on the tumbled brown head so near her.

“Listen,” she murmured. “I 'm the first girl you 've loved, Reggie. Let 's ticket you the tenth man for me! That does n't sound nice, does it? You don't like it! Well, the man I marry must like it, must be glad of it, must thank heaven for every man of them all who 's had any part in making me the sort of woman I am—whatever sort I am. And you can't love me that

CLEM

way, yet. And by the time you can—perhaps by then I should n't like the work of the ten women who had come between us, to change you from the boy you are now! Or it may not be ten women, Reggie, but the one girl you 'll love. And I don't think she 'll mind the thought of me, not if she understands the way you love me, dear. Tell her it was Love you loved, and that I stood for it for a brief three months; and she 'll understand, better than you understand now. It 's ended, Reggie; it 's ended!"

She was still kneeling by him, her hands pressed hard on his shoulders, and, as she finished, she drew his face down to hers, and kissed him on the lips. His eyes looked dazed and hurt.

"It 's not ended," he said stubbornly. "You 've been listening to nonsense—if mother has been saying—"

Clem put her hand firmly over his mouth. "She 's said nothing—nothing—nothing! She never would—again. She took me to my room and stayed by me one

CLEM

night till I fell asleep. We watched over you together, she and I—she knows me better than she did; and she trusts me. I know she trusts me, now. But it's ended, Reggie; it's over!"

Reggie groaned dismally. "If only I were on my feet again! I can't hold you to what you said to a delirious fool; a fool you thought had shot himself, and was too much of a fool to kill himself—"

Clem's eyes brimmed with tearful laughter. "Don't you see how absurd it is, dear!" she said; and kneeling by him she laughed and cried together until the boy implored her to desist.

"It's so funny that it's heart-breaking!" she explained inadequately. She looked up at him at last. "I'd better go, Reggie."

Reggie caught her full meaning. "No," he said bluntly. "You can't. You said, that day you threw me down, that we could be friends still."

"Well, you did n't seem to think we could," Clem remarked.

"You see," she added, "my work here is

CLEM

done. You 're all but well. You could be down-stairs now, up and down by yourself, if we did n't want to be so careful. Next week you 'll be all over the place. I could n't stay any longer, you see that; so why not go now, in a day or two?"

"Don't plan about it yet," Reggie implored. "I need to get sort of settled. I 've thought that things were the same, and yet all the time I knew they were n't; knew that you were just making a big baby of me. But I want to get on my feet again before I give up the fight! What can I do, pinned down like a bug in this chair—Clem, I wish you had n't thought I was such a damned fool!"

"I 'm sorry!" Clem said, with an irrepressible smile, and Reggie, looking up and catching her eyes, after a hard struggle with his dignity, laughed ruefully.

"I 'm going to leave you now," Clem informed him. "I 'll tell your mother—"

"Don't tell anybody," the young man said morosely. "I want to be by myself."

"Then I 'll tell Virginia that you want

CLEM

her to come up to-night after dinner, shall I?" Clem wheedled. "I won't come in again to-day, unless you send for me, and you 'd better not. But I 'll bring you your breakfast to-morrow, and see that you eat it. Shall I send you Virginia?"

"Vee 's a kid!" growled the aged lover.

For many weeks Clem had pondered over the why of that first talk of hers and Virginia Garnet's during her first week at The Pines; that talk in which the younger girl, under a transparent question, had outlined her own first experience of love. A random remark of Dell Gresham's had confirmed Clem's conclusion; it was evident that Virginia's small love affair had been eruptive in its nature and process, and that it was therefore no secret. Yet Dell's speaking of it at all was a distinct mark of confidence, since it was the other side which discussed it, to Lorimer's intense annoyance. Clem had long since perceived, of her own intelligence, the delicate, filmy, motherly planning she had destroyed; the great, and in all ways desirable, good she

CLEM

had frustrated. She looked at Reggie, a faint conception dawning within her of why she might be holding all these vari-colored threads. Yes, it was an eminently suitable thing: Drake Lorimer's cousin, sweet, tender, beloved of Reggie's mother—Reggie's wife! Could it be? Could it be made to be?

She spoke quickly, because she would not let herself consider the wisdom of her words; her impulse to say them was so strong that it must be right to follow it.

"Virginia, a kid! Reggie, you 're a bat, a mole! Can't you see that she 's a woman grown; that she 's been—hurt?"

Reggie stared up at her vaguely. "Do you mean that she 's in love—too?" he stammered. "Who with? Who 's the man?"

Already Clem half repented of her words. It was an open secret, and yet, Reggie had not known it; it was too much like betrayal.

"Don't ask me, and don't ask her!" she said. "But don't call her a child any longer, a child who knows nothing—when there 's

CLEM

such a lot she could teach you! I know you hate to have me tell you any woman—even your grandmother—is older than you are. Shall I ask her to come up?”

“As you like!” sighed Reggie. She held out her hand, and after a scant moment of sad gazing, Reggie took it, and then put up a long arm, and caught her about the neck.

“You don’t mind!” he murmured, as he kissed her.

“Mind!” Clem laughed gently. “Not any more than if you were a kitten, dear.”

And with that barren joy to feast upon, she left him.

She wore a rather rueful smile when she stepped into the hall, and its peculiar quality struck Lowe, who met her face to face.

“You could n’t take a stroll or a drive?” he asked her insinuatingly. “What is it? You are smiling like a well-behaved child whose stick of candy has just been taken from her! Who has seized it?”

“I’ve given it away,” Clem answered soberly. “No, Jack, I want to rest.” And she turned abruptly from him.

XVIII

CLEM looked up from her letters the next morning, with relief and regret mingled in her heart. Here, in this letter, lay her way of escape, as well as her path of love and duty. And yet, as she read the lines which were her summons away, she felt an odd sinking of her heart.

She sat in silence for a few moments, dropping lump after lump of sugar into her coffee, until she discovered it to be a thick and nauseous syrup. She pushed it away with a grimace, and spoke, after a manner to the entire board, and yet directly to Mrs. Wines.

“My father ’s on the verge of going abroad at last. He gets into town day after to-morrow, and he wants me back there with him, for his last week. I ought to go, to-morrow night, I think.”

The spontaneous regret which met her

CLEM

words all but embarrassed her. She was glad that her call to the city was of so demanding a nature. A silly, transparent excuse could not have withstood their assaults. She was glad when Reggie's breakfast-tray was brought in, because she always went up-stairs with it and its bearer. She carried her letters with her, and went into his room with this new ultimatum to follow so close upon the heels of yesterday. Reggie greeted her with sulky delight.

"I 've been waiting for an hour," he said. "I should have sent for you if you had n't come. There 's no reason why you should keep away from me, if I 'm willing to have you round—and I am!"

"You 've got a fine Italian nature!" she said with a rapid little brushing of her fingers against his cheek. "Cheer up, old man; you 're always snappish till you 're fed. I did n't have an idea of not coming in this morning, and I 'll stay with you all day if you like; for I 've got to go to-morrow, Reggie. Yes, I have, straight! My

CLEM

father 's going to sail next week, and he reaches New York day after to-morrow. I can't let my old dad go off for God knows how long, without a farewell bat with him."

"And then you 'll come back here?" Reggie said, with a certainty of inflection which did not correspond with his voice, which was wistful in the extreme. His morose expression deepened as Clem shook her head.

"I can't, Reggie. Yes, your mother asked me to. But I can't."

"You can, but you won't," he growled. "And if I thought you were faking that excuse too—"

Clem held her father's letter before his eyes, and Reggie impenitently read.

"Oh, you play straight enough," he conceded in half apology. "And, of course, with all this, you 've got to go. It seems cursed coincidental, though. But you might come back."

"I can't, Reggie," she told him.

All morning long she sat beside him,

CLEM

both of them deeply conscious that some spell was broken. Her departure had come about pertinently and naturally and inevitably, as she had desired. Without doubt, her work here was done. Reggie was all but well in body, and was not broken in heart, however uncontrite he might be; nor more than passing sad in mind, thanks to the clear absurdity of that misapprehension which had rained ridicule and light laughter upon young love. And now and then, because talk of themselves was probed to the ultimate depths, they spoke of Virginia, Reggie with a deep and growing curiosity which Clem refused to gratify. And it was to Virginia that Clem gave up her place that she might begin her preparations for leaving.

It was to that same gentle nurse that he turned the next morning, after he had waved an invalided hand to the Greshams and Lorimer and Clem as they went off together for a last ride. That was Clem's own manipulation, and she smiled in triumph that was all her own at the sight

CLEM

of those two young faces bending from Reggie's window. What she could do she had done. The rest lay in their own hands and in the future.

Through some other subtle machination of which she had been supremely unconscious, she looked ahead down a long, level road, later in the morning, and saw no one of their party, save only Lorimer, riding beside her. They had been talking and racing by turns, for how long she did not know. At all events, they were completely separated from their quondam companions.

"What does it matter?" Lorimer said. "Dell and Eaton are still honeymooning. They started across the country half an hour ago. Come; ahead of us is a spot made by God for the rest of the weary. We can let the beasts graze, and you can put up your hair in supreme peace."

A little further on, Lorimer led the way, a few paces aside from the road, and dismounted; and while he attempted to limit the radius of grazing-ground, Clem stood, fastening up some of the heavy braids of

CLEM

her hair which had become loosened in their last race. Posed so, she looked, even in her tailored habit, more a goddess than a mortal woman. She was flawlessly lovely; and Lorimer, looking, was lost.

Clem, her braids secured beneath her riding-hat, glanced casually up into his eyes, and, being no unskilled seeress in the ways of men, perceived that an unexpected and yet a strangely unsurprising crisis was impending heavily. Her brain traveled a lightning path back over the weeks, and she saw precisely the steps which had led them both to this precipitate moment. She had not foreseen it; she had never thought of it as possible; but she realized now that the only reason for her lack of taking thought for the morrow in this instance was her unvoiced conviction that Drake Lorimer was triple-guarded against all her powers. Otherwise she must have interpreted many of his words and deeds just as the present moment was interpreting them.

"I wish you 'd look at Soubrette's left forefoot," she remarked coolly, as she

CLEM

thrust one of her two remaining hairpins into place. "I think she picked up a stone back yonder."

Lorimer smiled slightly, whereby Clem perceived that he had perceived her perception of a moment back. She knew then that the situation was not to be saved by palpable evasions, and yet she tried to break the spell once again.

"Hurry, please," she said, pushing the last pin emphatically into place. "I 've got to get back to Reggie."

"Reggie is eliminated from this," Lorimer said. "Oh, you wonderful woman! Am I blind that I have not seen; deaf that I have not heard, from his own lips, his ignorant tale of what you have done for him! If it were possible for me to love you more, he gave me the cause, last night, in his rambling, hurt talk."

The girl frowned a little. "All this is past history," she said. "It 's been talked over too much, anyway. It 's been played out under arc-lights. At least we can keep

CLEM

our tongues still about it. What sort do you take me for—”

“For the sort of woman, and that sort only, who could say to her boy-lover what you said to yours!” Lorimer retorted vehemently. “He said it all over to me last night, poor chap; said it dully; he did not know a tenth of what you meant. But let me tell you, for your glory, that you accomplished the work you set yourself to do; you left him his Ideal unsmirched; you left him his belief in his Perfect Woman still alive—all that with the wisdom of a first experience. He does n’t know, and may not, for another score of years, what you have done for him in this crucial time of his life; and his mother only faintly knows. But I know, Clem.”

She flushed a little, and her eyes met his for a second.

“You get under my guard when you talk that way of Reggie,” she murmured. “You put it a little different—I hope I *have* done all that; all I wanted to do was to

CLEM

leave him for some other girl—the right girl—just as sweet and clean and wholesome—”

She broke off abruptly, and Lorimer stooped and mechanically picked up her horse's forefoot. As he raised his head, she flung him one of her old, brilliant smiles.

“So, if you feel satisfied about Reggie, it 's all right. I reckon that stone was a mistake, my mentioning it. Come, let 's go back. Oh, why need it go any further—”

Lorimer interrupted her sternly. “What do you mean? That I have not said it all, in saying that I love you? Don't you know that means all things; that I have no wish on earth but to make you my wife—”

Clem sat down against the grassy mound against which she had been half kneeling. She dropped her chin into her hand, and she motioned him freely to the place beside her.

“There 's no helping it now,” she said. “We might as well have it out, here and

CLEM

forever. Sit down and let 's be as comfortable as we can, because—”

But Lorimer stood before her, speaking with rigid self-control.

“Don't say what you were going to say now—yet. Because you are going to dismiss it all with a word. This thing means too much—it deserves more than a dismissing word. It began the first night I looked into your face. I know that now. It grew to gigantic height that night you went away only to come back, three hours later.”

Clem flushed again. “Ever since I 've been back, I 've wanted to say something to you about that talk of ours, and I could never find the words. I could n't take it back, because I believe in my soul that everything I said is true. But I 've been mighty sorry lots of times since that I said all I did. It was n't generous; there was no sense in it, no use in it, no good done by it. I wish I had n't.”

“I 've never wanted you to take back one word,” Lorimer replied steadily. “Nor

CLEM

have I wished that you had left anything unsaid. You made the petty things of life shrink into nothingness; you made only the big things in it seem worth while. You have shamed us all—there have been many times when I could have kissed your garment's hem for the outgiving virtue of it. I think we have all thanked the gods for this accidental chance which brought you back here, to give us our chance—”

Clem put out her hand in mute protest.

“That 's all buried and done for,” she said. “No good ever came of raking up old scores.”

“As for this other thing,” she added, after a pause. “I 'm sorry, but it 's not possible. Oh, it 's not *possible*! You 've got sense enough to see straight; why do you try to ride through a mountain; to beat your head against a wall that won't be battered down?”

“I must know all this beyond all doubt,” Lorimer insisted. His face had paled slightly, but his eyes were gleaming. “You

CLEM

must tell me why— Ah, let us talk face to face in this. You are too big to turn away, and refuse to face any truth; and this is Truth, Clem.”

Clem struck with her whip the long, dry grass at her feet.

“Both of us are going to get hurt if we don’t call it all off—now!—and shake hands. Come!”

She held out her hand with a glance which was brightly beseeching. Lorimer shook his head.

“I promise you that I will shake hands with you at last, if it must be only that,” he said. “But not now—”

“It must all come to the same thing,” she interrupted. “This way we both accept it. The other way—we handle live coals and burn our hands, and perhaps can’t shake hands because of the sting and smart—”

“Let us pick up the burning coals,” Lorimer pressed. “You can’t expect me to take my dismissal with merely a friendly hand-clasp, after this.”

“After all, it ’s soon said,” Clem re-

CLEM

marked. "Sit down, do; let's be comfortable. You're keen enough to know that the thing which drew you toward me for awhile back yonder was n't congeniality, but our awful unlikeness. I've been brought up with men, you know—that's enough to account for my unlikeness to most of the women you've known; and by the same token it accounts for your being a new sort to me. I've lived with *men*, you know—"

Lorimer's lips parted, even as they whitened slightly. But Clem forestalled him.

"Here's my idea!" she said quickly. She picked up his hand and laid it, palm down, along her own. She followed its fine outline with her finger while she talked:

"Here's my idea! It fascinated me, this hand of yours, the first night I met you, when I read your hand and Jack's together. The difference there is in them! Jack's a gentleman—I've known a lot of men who were gentlemen of sorts—but I never in my life met any man but you who would n't be capable of forgetting, some-

CLEM

times, that he was a gentleman, in remembering that he was a man! You 'd never forget it; you could n't! If you were ever face to face with Life, with only these hands of yours between you and it and Death, you 'd die like a gentleman, but you 'd die.

"I 've been reading a lot of your books this last month. I 've been reading up on your women, your men; and I 've learned more about *you*, there, than you 'd believe was there. I know now, the sort of men and women you stand for; the sort of life and living you admire. It 's hard to say any of this without saying things that I don't mean. But the fact is, that both you and I are limited, in some ways, forever; and what each of us has lacked, we 've liked in the other. But for us to try to get past those limitations—it would be hell; you take my word for that. You know it, without words!"

She glanced at him quickly, but he was looking straight ahead of him, with a face so set that a weary shadow crept into her eyes.

CLEM

"Well, that 's the whole of it," she added again, in the pause which Lorimer did not break, although she waited for him hopefully. "All of us have slumbering traits that reach out after, the same ones, developed in others—" She broke off abruptly. "It 's hard to talk sometimes, is n't it? Words are nothing but thick veils that you draw down over what you are really thinking. I 'm afraid I 've made a bad botch of it all—"

"You 've made yourself painstakingly clear," Lorimer said, between dry lips. "Yes, I insisted; you had to make your stand. No, I don't blame you for anything you have said, now or at any time. Know that always. You are not to blame because my blood is not red enough to call to you, and my hands are not brawny enough to conquer you. You are quite right; I should not grapple frantically with life and death; I should realize too keenly the weary futility of fighting against impossible odds."

He sprang to his feet and held out his hand to her.

CLEM

“Well, after all this carrying of coals, let us shake hands; the smart of the burn does not preclude the keeping of that promise.”

She put out her hand with averted eyes, and he held it for a moment without speaking.

“I am going to say good-by, here, now,” he said at last. “You are leaving us to-night! I shall take you back to the house, and if you don’t see me again, you will know by new proof that I am not a man who thinks it worth while to fight shadows or stone walls.”

He paused, but he did not release her hand, and he stood looking down upon her fair head and her averted face.

“In those first days,” he said abruptly, “some one we both know pictured you in phrases that I would give most things to call mine, phrases that I could not have made then of you, and yet they have stood always for you in my heart. And if it is worth while to have made them, it is worth much to be the subject of them: ‘She looked

CLEM

the primitive Woman. . . . She might have been *the* primeval Woman, walking untrodden sands, pressing the springing earth when the world was young. . . . She was so nobly unashamed and so purely human. . . . The very atoms of her might have been scooped up from virgin earth, from sea-born clay just washed to shore. . . . And a Rodin hand might have modeled her! ”

He said it reverently, slowly.

He bent low at last to look into her face. “Clem!” he said.

She looked up at him blindly. He could not read her face—the strange light on it.

“Did Jack say that? Then?—That far back?” she stammered.

Lorimer drew back a little. “Jack? Yes, it was Jack; though I did n’t say so.”

He was surveying her with unflinching keenness. Suddenly he caught up both her hands and drew her to her feet, and for a moment they looked on each other, in bewildered silence. Then Lorimer released her, and stepped back with a little smile

CLEM

about his lips that was like a groan repressed.

"I think," he said slowly, "that we have both been reasoning from false premises, in this talk of ours. And, on each side, most innocently."

For another moment he stared down into her face, and then he lifted her hands, and held them close against his breast, looking at her with all of the longing and none of the joy of love.

"You will be very happy," he said in a strained, keen voice. "Very happy. You are made for joy, and you will live it; and if I may be able ever to further it in any way—"

He raised his eyes, and looked straight above Clem's head, into Lowe's face; Lowe, who, in the course of a solitary stroll, had chanced upon this woodland scene. For a moment the eyes of the two men met in a look which was unmistakable to each of them, and Lorimer, if he had never felt it before, knew then the primal call to battle.

And then heredity and environment and,

CLEM

perhaps, the sense of the weary futility of struggle fell upon that primal call and crushed it. He laid her hands gently down, and spoke over her shoulder to Lowe, in a voice that almost achieved his customary level tone.

"You 're walking, Jack? Then take my horse, will you, when Miss Merrit is ready to go back, and see her safely home?"

Clem, turning quickly, protesting fiercely, was hushed into dumbness by the vivid fire in Lowe's eyes as he came toward her. They stood in silence until all sound of footsteps had died away, and then, at a quick move of Lowe toward her, Clem shrank back against a tree trunk, holding him off with a raised hand. She broke into hurried words.

"I 've just heard of—the *bully* thing you did for me, Jack, down at the beach, weeks ago—that stunt of yours in words, Jack!" She was laughing a little, trying, so, to hide the great emotion which surged through her. "I have n't the nerve to quote it—all that virgin earth and sea-born

CLEM

clay business—but you could n't have added another word to what you said!"

Lowe's fixed gaze and impassive face were relieved only by the flicker of his light lashes, and, at last, by a shadowy smile.

"I could have added nothing—there!" he conceded. "But all was not said in that long past moment, Clem."

He was standing before her, his hands clasped behind him, yet as close to her as if he held her in his arms.

"All these two years of meetings and of absences have been bringing us both to this relentless moment. You know that. We belong to each other, and this is our hour. Nothing, nobody, counts in it, save only you and me. You know that."

Her face had paled, but in her eyes no doubts lingered. He saw there the answer to the cry, and he did not need to hear her solemnly uttered words.

"Yes, I know that," she said.

THE END

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